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**'BETWEEN THE WORDS OF A SONG': SUPERNATURAL AND MYTHICAL
ELEMENTS IN THE SCOTTISH FICTION OF NAOMI MITCHISON**

MOIRA BURGESS

**Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in the Department of Scottish Literature,
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'BETWEEN THE WORDS OF A SONG': SUPERNATURAL AND MYTHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SCOTTISH FICTION OF NAOMI MITCHISON

MOIRA BURGESS

Abstract

The supernatural is a recurrent element in the fiction of Naomi Mitchison. This thesis examines four novels and a selection of short stories from a period in her career, approximately 1935-1960, when she was based mostly in Scotland, had rediscovered her Scottish identity, and was using Scottish themes and settings in her work. It considers Mitchison's attitude to 'the irrational' and her perception of a connection between this and her gift of creativity. Mitchison's interest in the supernatural was combined with an interest in science and an extreme practicality and pragmatism in everyday life, one of many contradictions which can be found in her life and writing. The thesis goes on to examine the influence on her thinking and writing of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*.

The **Introduction** summarises the topic, scope and approach of the thesis and places the work of the selected period in the context of the rest of Mitchison's fiction. **Chapter 1** examines the recurrence of apparently supernatural experiences in her life, noting parallel experiences recorded by other writers, and suggesting a possible explanation for her childhood terrors. **Chapter 2** traces the influence of these experiences on her writing, and also considers influences from her extensive reading, such as the ballads and the work of George MacDonald. The mythical element in Mitchison's work is linked to that in the work of other novelists of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Her poem 'The House of the Hare' is examined and the connections that Mitchison found between creativity, sexuality and fertility are described and discussed. **Chapters 3-6** consider her novels, *We Have Been Warned* (1935), *The Bull Calves* (1947), *The Big House* (1950) and *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952), with reference to the supernatural and mythical elements in each, noting that Mitchison apparently subscribed to Margaret Murray's view of witchcraft as a surviving pagan religion. **Chapter 7** surveys the recurrence of supernatural themes in Mitchison's short stories. **Chapter 8** considers the recurrent concepts of the fairy hill and the swan maiden, suggesting that these concepts were seen by Mitchison as relevant to her own life. Finally, a **Conclusion** offers an overall summary of the supernatural and mythical components in Mitchison's life and work.

Appendices: **I:** the Margaret Murray theory of witchcraft; **II:** the swan maiden myth and its use in a range of creative work; **III :** Mitchison's response to a 1942

Mass-Observation directive on supernatural belief; IV: the lyrics of the song 'The Thing', a possible source of her story 'The Box'.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for titles of works by Naomi Mitchison:

<i>ACH</i>	<i>All Change Here</i>
<i>AGML</i>	<i>A Girl Must Live</i>
<i>AYTN</i>	<i>Among You Taking Notes</i>
<i>BC</i>	<i>The Bull Calves</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>The Big House</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Black Sparta</i>
<i>CK</i>	<i>The Cleansing of the Knife</i>
<i>FMS</i>	<i>Five Men and a Swan</i>
<i>FP</i>	<i>The Fourth Pig</i>
<i>LA</i>	<i>Lobsters on the Agenda</i>
<i>LB</i>	<i>The Laburnum Branch</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Mucking Around</i>
<i>MH</i>	<i>Men and Herring</i>
<i>RFH</i>	<i>Return to the Fairy Hill</i>
<i>SSP</i>	<i>Naomi Mitchison (Saltire Self-Portrait)</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Small Talk</i>
<i>TCP</i>	<i>To the Chapel Perilous</i>
<i>WDYTY</i>	<i>What Do You Think Yourself?</i>
<i>WHBW</i>	<i>We Have Been Warned</i>
<i>YMWA</i>	<i>You May Well Ask</i>

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will consider the occurrence of supernatural and mythical themes in the work of Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999). While she published over eighty books, fiction, poetry, drama and non-fiction, as well as a great deal of still uncollected poetry and prose, the principal focus here will be on the writing of the two decades from 1940 to 1960. These years produced most of what we may call Mitchison's Scottish novels, as distinct from her African and science fiction novels, though the oeuvre of such a prolific and adventurous writer cannot be divided up quite as neatly as that would imply.

In the chronology of Mitchison's writing these might also be called her Carradale years. In strict reckoning there were in fact over sixty Carradale years. Mitchison was born in Edinburgh, and, though she was brought up in Oxford, spent her early married life in London, travelled widely, and maintained an international outlook, she came to feel her Scottishness as deep and inescapable. She spent holidays at her family home of Cloan in Perthshire and later in the West Highlands, and in 1937 she and her husband bought Carradale House in Kintyre. Originally intended as a holiday retreat, it remained her home until her death in 1999. Her most intense relationship with Carradale, the village and its people, however, lasted from the end of the 1930s to the mid or late 1950s. (She more than once describes this relationship as a love affair, and, like other such affairs, it followed a variable course, ending in perhaps inevitable disillusionment.)

Mitchison played many roles besides that of writer during her long life. Aristocrat; socialist; wife and mother; lover; farmer; fisheries expert; Argyll county councillor; feminist; Scottish nationalist; internationalist;

African tribal elder; the list goes on. The very title of the biography by Jenni Calder published to mark Mitchison's hundredth birthday, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, emphasises her multi-faceted quality.¹ Because of this and because of Mitchison's slightly unorthodox publishing history – after the success of the early novels published in her twenties and thirties, she dropped out of sight, critically speaking, for many years – it is easy to assume that writing was just another activity in her busy life. Some contemporary reviewers suggested that it would have been better for her writing career, or for her status as a writer, if she had not been doing so many other things at the same time. She considers the question herself:

Would I have done better to be only one person? Perhaps. Most of the really successful writers do one thing, remain one person. But it isn't so interesting for them – or maybe in the final judgment, their readers.²

In fact it will be argued in the course of this thesis that Mitchison's writing was a continual accompaniment to her other concerns; that her creativity as a writer underpinned and permeated everything she undertook; and that she saw this creativity as associated with, and indeed enabled by, her mythic view of herself and her world.

Ambiguities and ambivalences can be seen in several spheres of Mitchison's life and work. There is an over-arching question of how to reconcile her commitment to progress – her open attitude to sexual morality and her unceasing attempts to bring rural communities (in Scotland and Africa) into the twentieth century – with her espousal of the values of traditional communities. It is clear from Calder's biography, and also from Mitchison's own autobiographies, fiction and poetry, that while she was able to occupy more than one role at any one time, even when they were apparently incompatible – for instance, a committed socialist who maintained a near-feudal lifestyle – she did recognise areas of potential and actual conflict. To such paradoxes she returns constantly in interview and in her

¹ Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (Virago, 1997).

² Naomi Mitchison in Angela Catlin, *Natural Light* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1985), p. 68. Naomi Mitchison as author hereafter cited as NM.

writing, completely aware that her life, character and beliefs are full of contradiction.

This thesis examines an area less frequently explored by Mitchison herself or, so far, by critics. There appears to have been a conflict in Mitchison's mind between the rational scientific world and the realm of the supernatural. She generally uses the term 'the irrational' rather than 'the supernatural'. I use both, though acknowledging the view of the folklorist Barbara Rieti:

I use with reluctance [the term] 'supernatural', which is objectionable in the semantic sense that anything that is in the world cannot be considered 'outside' or 'above' nature; it carries an implicit judgment on objective reality that I wish to avoid ... The term can be misleading, too, in its popular sense of 'strange' or 'uncanny', because not everyone considers the fairies particularly extraordinary. ... [T]here are without a doubt people (including some of my informants) who take a matter-of-fact rather than awestruck view of the fairies.³

As will be found, Mitchison appears to have taken this matter-of-fact view. Her concept of the irrational, however, is not the essentially fragmentary one of superstition and fairy belief, but encompasses the more structured narrative of myth. This thesis examines the question of a mythic framework in her writing and in her life: the two, it will be argued, are closely linked. In addition, conflict between rational and irrational – realism and the supernatural – is very evident in her writing: sometimes overt, in the form of argument among her characters, sometimes immanent in the work itself, leading to the possibility of different readings of a novel such as *The Bull Calves*. This thesis will deal both with Mitchison's life, through her documentary writing and autobiographies, and with her literary writing in novels and the short story genre.

Mitchison's views on the supernatural are scattered through her essays and autobiographical writing. She does not seem to have written at length

³ Barbara Rieti, *Strange Terrain: the Fairy World in Newfoundland* (St John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991), p. 12.

about her supernatural beliefs as such, and there are intriguing hints that – superstitiously? – she did not want to.

And we in the north, in Scotland, have our own shapes in the water of loch and lynn [sic]. We can call them kelpies or water-horses in the days of our disbelief, but their power is of the Mother-Goddesses, demanding human sacrifice. Perhaps I do wrong to invoke them even thus far.⁴

In her memoirs, however, casual references to irrational events abound: seeing fairies, curing a headache through her healing powers, marrying a hare. More extended consideration of related matters can be found in the notes to *The Bull Calves* (1947) (pp. 496-504 and pp. 511-7) and in her second volume of autobiography *All Change Here* (1975) (see the chapter ‘Inside Naomi Haldane’, particularly pp.92-6). These passages deal, respectively, with witchcraft and with her own night terrors as a child, and in both cases Mitchison queries whether the phenomena may have had recognisable and rational causes. She comes to no definite decision.

Also examined throughout this thesis is the great mass of Mitchison’s journalistic writing during the relevant years.⁵ The received view is that Mitchison was unable to do much significant writing during World War II, and there is some justification for such an opinion. Her bibliography as it is usually presented does seem to show near-blankness in the period 1939-45: what she was writing appears only later, with the publication of her major historical novel *The Bull Calves* in 1947 and of excerpts from the million-word war diary she kept for the social research organisation Mass-Observation, under the title *Among You Taking Notes*, in 1985. She was, however, writing for newspapers and periodicals, some of it hack-work but much in her own distinctive voice, a valuable and largely untapped biographical source which often expands on episodes and themes treated more briefly in her published memoirs.

⁴ NM, ‘The Empty Places’, *Scotland*, 20 (1948), 8-11 (11).

⁵ The even more extensive corpus of her mss has had to be ignored: it is examined in Helen Lloyd, *Witness to a Century: the Autobiographical Writings of Naomi Mitchison* (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2005).

It remains true that during these early Carradale years she could seldom find time for the sustained writing necessary for a novel or a book-length non-fiction work. The war years were full of political, local and personal problems. Well aware of the importance of writing to her life, she chafes in her war diaries under the demands of family, house, farm and public duty, wishing that she could devote herself to the writing which she knows to be her real job.

I do feel like hell; it is partly being tired, partly that I feel so stupid; I can't concentrate, I forget facts, I can't read a serious book. ... And I get like screaming when all these girls talk at once. How can one write when one feels like that?⁶

For this reason among others, the early years in Carradale were full of practical and emotional difficulties. Mitchison found there, however (as indeed she might have found in other Highland communities at that time), a store of folk memories of witches, a standing stone with curative powers, a spirit in the glen which could be heard weeping before a death. Carradale appears to have acted as a focus for her awareness of the irrational, which, like writing, is a constant accompaniment to everyday concerns. Sometimes this is presented to near-comic effect, as Mitchison undoubtedly recognised.

Some counties very sensibly employ water diviners [to locate a water supply for an area], though I doubt if this is officially recognised. It was a county official of another Highland county who first taught me to use a divining rod.⁷

This West Highland ambience is among the influences affecting her work; others will be considered in chapters 1 and 2.

But her views, like those of any writer, must also be sought in her creative writing. The presence of a supernatural strand in her fiction has often been noted, though (understandably, given that Mitchison studies have only recently begun to appear) it has not so far been explored in depth. Such a strand can be traced through her complete oeuvre. Human-animal

⁶ NM, *Among You Taking Notes* (Gollancz, 1985), p. 158. Hereafter cited as *AYTN*.

⁷ NM, 'Remote Area', *New Statesman*, 54 (1957), 772.

metamorphosis – shape-shifting – occurs in her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923); near the end of her career *Early in Orcadia* (1987) tries, in its depiction of Stone Age communities in what would become Orkney, to trace the development of myth. Erif Der, the central character of her major novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), is early shown to have magic powers. The novels examined in chapters 3 to 6 of this thesis are *We Have Been Warned* (1935) (pre-Carradale, but set partly in Argyll); *The Bull Calves* (1947); *The Big House* (1950) (published as a children's novel, but arguably much more than that); and *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952). While these four novels display a process of development in Mitchison as a literary artist, it is notable that each is infused with an element of the irrational, which will be defined and discussed in these chapters.

From the 1960s onwards Mitchison begins to write fiction set in Africa which draws heavily on local lore and superstitions: all the stories in *Images of Africa* (1980), for instance, have a supernatural element. About the same time she is also writing science fiction; her first novel in that genre, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, was published in 1962. In many ways Mitchison's science fiction provides a bridge between two of her personae: the assiduously accurate scientist and the passionate imaginative writer. She herself entered with zest the long-running debate about the relation between science fiction (sf) and fantasy:

There must at least be some solid evidence of the possibility of what we describe or infer in our stories. Anything beyond is fantasy. But here we are in something of a puzzlement and we do not always recognize it ourselves, even while we are writing. ... Almost any author other than the real hardliners like Asimov, Heinlein, Van Vogt and Clarke falls into f for fantasy more or less, perhaps for a whole book. Sometimes Bradbury does it so continuously that we only get glimpses of the s behind the f.⁸

Just as significant as Mitchison's novels are her short stories and poems. There is a case for considering the short stories, with their overlap of

⁸ NM, 'Wonderful deathless ditties', *The Profession of Science Fiction*, ed. by M. Jakubowski and E. James (Macmillan, 1992), pp. 34-43 (41). [Originally published 1981]

oral tradition and literary art, as a more accomplished literary achievement than the novels: the retold fairy tales in *The Fourth Pig* (1936), for instance, are markedly ahead of their time.⁹ Some of her many short stories are discussed in chapter 7 of this thesis, including those produced in the decades between 1940 and 1960; for instance, the great story 'Five Men and a Swan', written in 1940.¹⁰

Mitchison's use of the supernatural in fiction is wide-ranging, and this thesis will therefore consider shifting concerns of myth, witchcraft, folklore and magic, often linked with the idea of community. Douglas Gifford has pointed out that the use of supernatural and myth is a recurrent feature throughout the history of Scottish literature from earliest times to the present, and very notable in the Scottish Literary Renaissance from its beginnings in the 1920s.¹¹ As discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, the work of Naomi Mitchison can thus be seen as not merely chronologically but thematically central to the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

Finally, this thesis will attempt to establish why the element of the irrational is so pervasive in Mitchison's work. In the invented country of Marob in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, where seed-time and harvest are perceived to depend on the symbolic life and death of a god-king, it is plausible that a central character should be given magical powers. In Africa Mitchison found magic to be part of life, acknowledged in the fields of medicine and justice as well as in domestic affairs, a situation reflected in *Images of Africa*.

But she also includes witchcraft in what is ostensibly a novel of social and political concern (*We Have Been Warned*) and in a satirical novel of the

⁹ As indeed in their different ways are several of her novels. NM's role as an innovator was scarcely recognised by her contemporaries and has still not been adequately assessed.

¹⁰ See also Moira Burgess, 'Naomi Mitchison', *Dictionary of Literary Biography 319: British and Irish Short-Fiction Writers, 1945-2000* (Columbia, SC: Brucoli Clark Layman, 2005), pp. 235-44.

¹¹ Douglas Gifford, 'Imagining Scotlands: the return to mythology in modern Scottish fiction', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the present*, ed. by Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 17-49.

contemporary West Highlands (*Lobsters on the Agenda*). Two images in particular, the fairy hill and the swan maiden, recur throughout her work, and are examined in chapter 8 of this thesis.

At times Mitchison seems to be using the supernatural to symbolise, reflect and comment on some of the issues which concerned her in public life, such as social inclusion, class relations, organised religion, and the position of women. At times she is exploring psychology in terms of the supernatural, a recurrent process in Scottish literature from James Hogg's *Justified Sinner* to Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*. At times the introduction of the irrational allows her to experiment with perspective, moving into the stream of modernism and surrealism with *We Have Been Warned*.

At times her view of the irrational seems linked to her personal life. On two occasions, embarking on highly idealistic relationships, with the people of Carradale during the 1940s and 1950s, and with the young African chief Linchwe and his tribe from the 1960s onwards, she comes to a locality as a stranger while strongly desiring to be part of its life. In each case she appears to feel the relationship validated by the corpus of myth, legend and tradition immanent in the area. This possibility leads to new readings of some of her work, including the story which at the time she thought perhaps the best thing she had written, 'Five Men and a Swan'.

The quotation used in the title of this thesis is from Mitchison's major poem 'The Cleansing of the Knife'. Yearning to solve the problem of Scotland, she feels it constantly nagging at her thoughts, 'between the words of a song'.¹² It is suggested in this thesis that throughout her life both the rational and the irrational are present in her mind and hence in her writing; that she is aware of myths and beliefs present in the interstices of everyday life, between the lines, that inform the words of the story and the song.

¹² NM, 'The Cleansing of the Knife, 1941-1947', *The Cleansing of the Knife* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), pp. 39-72 (65). Hereafter CK.

CHAPTER 1

Supernatural experience in the life of Naomi Mitchison

These were my ghosts that I gave way to.
Now from within the shape of terror
I see me young and in frozen fear of
My fetch that is giving the counter-sign.¹

The element of the irrational was present in Naomi Mitchison's life from a very early age. Daughter of the physiologist J.S. Haldane and sister of the geneticist J.B.S. Haldane, she had a keen interest in science and some informal research experience. She possessed an incisively logical intelligence and was active in many areas of political, economic and sociological development. Nevertheless, throughout her life, she experienced various phenomena for which she could find no scientific or rational explanation. References to these experiences are found in her autobiographical works.

Three of the seven books which can be regarded as autobiographical² constitute a quasi-formal memoir, though they account for less than half of her long life. *Small Talk ... Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973) covers the years to 1910 and *All Change Here: girlhood and marriage* (1975) continues to 1918. These adopt a broadly chronological approach, but a further continuation, *You May Well Ask: a memoir 1920-1940* (1979), is arranged in thematic sections of reminiscence and social comment.

Mitchison's other autobiographical works are equally valuable. *Mucking Around: five continents over fifty years* (1981) is based on letters to her husband during her extensive travels. *Among You Taking Notes ... the wartime diary of Naomi Mitchison, 1939-1945* (1985) was compiled for the

¹ From NM, 'Next Stop Perth', CK, p. 35.

² They are examined, with her letters and political diaries, in Lloyd, *Witness to a Century*.

social research organisation Mass-Observation, the original diary being edited to about one-tenth its length for the published volume. A short pamphlet in the Saltire Self-Portrait series, *Naomi Mitchison* (1986), is informative on Mitchison's rediscovery of a Scottish identity and on her years as a member of the Highland Panel from the 1940s onward. Following this in the chronology of Mitchison's life, though published earlier than the works previously cited, is *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966), part memoir, part examination of African life and culture, written in the first enthusiasm of her involvement with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana which continued for more than twenty years.

All these memoirs refer, sometimes at length and sometimes only in passing, to experiences which Mitchison considered to be supernatural or irrational, giving a clear impression that the irrational was, in her view, an integral part of life. A similar perception is gained from her response to a Mass-Observation directive on supernatural belief issued in 1942: 'I don't have beliefs about this sort of thing. I take it as it comes.'³

From the brief descriptions above it can be seen that the status of Mitchison's memoirs as accurate records of experience varies considerably. In most of them – the exceptions being *Among You Taking Notes*, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, and to some extent the Mass-Observation response – she is writing of events which occurred (if they did occur) thirty to seventy years previously. There are few descriptions of irrational experiences from contemporary notes. She did keep diaries for several years from the age of six, but, as she explains in *Small Talk*, the ghosts and terrors of which she was already aware are not to be found there.

I would not have written about those under any compulsion ... to speak or write might bring "Them" to life.⁴

³ Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex. Thanks to Helen Lloyd for drawing my attention to this document. It forms Appendix III of this thesis.

⁴ NM, *Small Talk* (Bodley Head, 1973), p. 26. Hereafter *ST*.

With this caveat, the experiences which she does record or remember may be considered, together with what explanations she was able to suggest in her constant quest to reconcile the scientific and the supernatural.

She was sensitive, for instance, to what has been called 'the spirit of place'.

Sometimes I felt that I had been seized hold of by something with a kind of personality, as in the train leaving Rome I felt entered into by the ghost of a girl, some kind of martyr, for suddenly I smelled burning wood and felt oddly sickened.⁵

This sensitivity to place dates, like her secret terrors, from early childhood. Her upbringing in big Victorian and Edwardian houses with their long corridors and shadowy rooms supplied potential material for ghost-related fears. She was born on 1 November 1897 at 10 Randolph Crescent in Edinburgh, the home of her maternal grandparents. The cellars there had 'things that looked like ghosts', but were actually stalactites, as six-year-old Naomi recorded in her diary. 'Thus scientific interest is allowed to mask the terror', she comments seventy years later (*ST*, p. 41), implicitly acknowledging that a memory of terror remains.

She spent long childhood holidays at her paternal grandmother's home, Cloan in Perthshire. 'The difficulty about Cloan was that it was full of ghosts and such,' she writes in her first memoir (*ST*, p. 33), and adds in the Mass-Observation response 'There is some kind of not canny thing at Cloan'.⁶ Practical jokes by her brother and cousins added to her feelings of nervous apprehension. She was informed by an aunt that a monster called a gorgonzola haunted the tower room: another joke, but a peculiarly misguided one.

The tower room was round, with the closed-in spiral staircase going up the middle so that if one opened the door into apparent dusty emptiness whatever else there might have been was certainly hiding behind the staircase wall. It still is in my dreams, waiting to come out at me. (*ST*, p. 33)

⁵ NM, *Mucking Around* (Gollancz, 1981), p. 15. Hereafter *MA*.

⁶ See Appendix III.

In an interview of 1984 she describes a conversation only two or three years previously with her cousin Graeme, near to her in age, who had shared these holidays at Cloan.

I asked him how frightened he'd been, and he said, 'Yes, I *was* frightened, but I managed not to show it.' And I said, 'Were you frightened of the Gorgonzola?' He said, 'Yes, yes.' So I said, 'Well, let us go up and see whether it's still there'. And he said, 'All right'. We crept up this winding stair until we got to this door. You see, the staircase goes up the middle, and one is shut in, and you open a door and you are in this Gorgonzola room, and the Gorgonzola might be at the other side. We went to the opposite side so that we could really see. He didn't appear to be there, but we weren't at all convinced.⁷

Though Mitchison laughs at this point in the interview, the memory of a childhood terror is evidently still clear in the minds of the eighty-year-old cousins.

The harvest fields at Cloan were the scene of what Mitchison later identified as an early mystical experience. She shaped it into the poem 'The House of the Hare' (CK, p. 1), which contains the startling and apparently unambiguous statement 'I was married young to a hare!' A biographer points out⁸ that the poem (and later prose accounts) were written many years after the supposed event, which, as the poem specifies, occurred, if it did occur, when the young Naomi was four years old: the caveat which can be applied to many of Mitchison's accounts of irrational experiences. However, commentators agree that the meaning of the episode is not dependent on biographical fact. It is highly important in demonstrating how closely Mitchison's life and writing were intertwined with imagination and myth, and will be examined in chapter 2 of this thesis.

The family home meanwhile was in Oxford, where Mitchison's father was a Research Fellow of New College. Her account of childhood in 'a young and not highly pecunious upper-middle-class family' (ST, p. 9) is full of closely observed social and personal detail, and Naomi Haldane comes across

⁷ 'Naomi Mitchison' in *Scottish Writers Talking 2*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Phantassie, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002), pp. 67-109 (80-81)

⁸ Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: a century of experiment in life and letters* (Pandora Press, 1990), p. 9.

to the reader as a lively, intelligent and generally happy little girl. But her life has a strange dark side.

I was frightened of a lot of things and today it is not clear how these things were related. I did not speak of them except on the very rare occasions when terror drove me into hysterical screaming. It was quite clear to me at the time that if I told anyone 'They' would make it a lot worse for me. (*ST*, p. 9)

'These things' are described in *Small Talk* and *All Change Here*, the memoirs of her childhood and adolescence. They clearly played a large part in her formation as a person and a writer, and will be examined more closely later in this chapter. They are not ghosts in the conventional sense of beings from another world. More frighteningly, they inhere in the ordinary furnishings of the everyday world, which means that they cannot be evaded.

What I was afraid of ... was what lay behind the apparent silence and stillness of inanimate objects, including bed knobs, roof finials and the pigeon house ... [T]here was a certain chair which I always avoided touching ... The grandfather clocks were equally ominous ... Mirrors – looking-glasses (I know that one was a more powerful word than the other, but which? ...) were especially treacherous, most of all tall ones with claw legs ... But I didn't like even the smallest. (*ST*, pp. 19-20)

She struggled against the fear. 'I wrote most of them out of my system in an early verse play.' (*ST*, p. 20). Though she does not identify the play, the early poem 'The Mirror and the Clock', published in Mitchison's first poetry collection *The Laburnum Branch*, seems to be related to it.

... I used to hate them
When they stood listening
Queer-eyed in corners,
By gas-light glistening.

But now we join
In a great alliance,
Against the world
I can cry defiance...⁹

⁹ NM, 'The Mirror and the Clock', *The Laburnum Branch* (Jonathan Cape, 1926), pp. 103-4 (104). Hereafter *LB*.

The poem is indeed a cry of defiance against her irrational fears, but it does not seem to have been entirely successful in banishing them. The terrors, most often referred to later as nightmares, recurred throughout her life. Her first biographer found this to be the case when she stayed with Mitchison in 1982.

That night I was awakened by Naomi's screams; she was having nightmares. In the morning she slumped, haggard, over the refrigerator. She said she had died twice in her sleep.¹⁰

And, approaching Mitchison's hundredth birthday in 1997, her second biographer reports: 'Tabitha Lucas, a granddaughter, remembers that Naomi had a dislike of mirrors'.¹¹

As a girl of sixteen she was able to obtain some relief by confiding her fears to a young man, her brother's friend Dick Mitchison (whom she was to marry in 1916), on a river picnic.

I don't remember how it started, but suddenly I was telling him everything about the clock and the chair, the claw-legged mirror, the nightmares, the deep currents of fear and propitiation, and he was responding, not with disbelief or rationalisation, but with understanding. With love, doubtless, though I did not think of it in that word.¹²

Early experiments in the field of the paranormal with the writer Andrew Lang, a family friend, were, similarly, memorable enough to report in her childhood recollections many years later.. She considers the question of the fairies which 'he encouraged me to see (or think I saw).'

Looking back on this, it seems to me that what I perhaps perceived, rarely and fleetingly, but most commonly between the ages of about twelve and thirty-five, was as though any present moment of time consisted of something like two sheets of paper, each with a pinhole, moving against each other. If the pinholes accidentally coincided and one happened to be looking, one saw through. (*ST*, pp. 117-8)

¹⁰ Benton, p. 162.

¹¹ Calder, p. 283.

¹² NM, *All Change Here* (Bodley Head, 1975), p. 96. Hereafter *ACH*.

While in that passage, as in many, she is trying to explain the phenomena which she had experienced or observed, she does occasionally appear to take them for granted, however lasting their influence:

[He] encouraged me to see fairies; this I did from time to time, the last encounter being on the way back from the 1937 Labour Party Conference at Brighton – we had stopped to eat sandwiches and talk about George Lansbury. I happened to notice a hobyah type of fairy just going away. (*ACH*, p. 96)¹³

In early 1919, after the end of World War I, Mitchison and her husband settled in London, where Dick practised as a barrister. Mitchison's early adult life was a busy and complicated one as wife, mother, society hostess, and, increasingly, writer: her first novel *The Conquered* was published to considerable acclaim in 1923. (As noted in the Introduction and discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, it already has some irrational content.) Throughout her account of this period in *You May Well Ask*, casual references to supernatural or irrational experiences recur, with a continuing indecision about their status in reality, as in the question of 'seances ... I always felt there was something funny about them, though perhaps there wasn't'¹⁴.

In 1937 the family home became the village of Carradale in Kintyre, which was to remain Mitchison's base for over sixty years. Her important interaction with Carradale will be considered in detail later, but from her diary of the war years 1939-45 it seems clear that she had found a further locus of supernatural experiences: '[Pierre] particularly is wild about the beauty of the place ... but I explained to him that there were fairies and so on' (*AYTN*, p. 236). Similarly during her travels as a member of the Highland Advisory Panel in the years following World War II – another significant period in her life and writing which will be discussed later – she was occupied not merely with the social and economic problems of the west and north Highlands but with hints of the supernatural which came her way.

¹³ This encounter is described in an equally matter-of-fact tone in her Mass-Observation response: see Appendix III.

¹⁴ NM, *You May Well Ask* (Gollancz, 1979), p. 113. Hereafter *YMWA*.

The *Minna* was lying off Scalloway and in the morning when we got up there was a large castle looming over us. I said to Connie ... 'Come on, we'll get into that castle before the meeting.' So off we went ashore and round sungates until we got into the enclosure, but the nearer we got to the castle, the less I liked it, I don't know why. ... I couldn't somehow lift my hand to touch wall or window bar. I came away feeling shaken and a little sick. ... Mr Ganson told me that this was the castle of the wicked Earl of Shetland, who mixed its mortar with fresh blood and eggs. There above the chimney-head was the ring where one man a day was hanged, to encourage the others.¹⁵

In the 1960s Mitchison began her long involvement with the African country of Botswana (Bechuanaland until 1966). Her first visit was in 1964, responding to the invitation of the young paramount chief Linchwe whom she had befriended in Carradale some years earlier.¹⁶ She returned frequently over a period of some twenty-five years, becoming the honorary mother of the chief and hence of the tribe. She was keenly interested in all aspects of life in Botswana and worked hard to improve educational and social opportunities for the people. It is relevant here that she found herself in a society where magic – the supernatural, the irrational – was an accepted part of life.

The belief in sorcery ... still persists very strongly. It has even been given official recognition by the Administration. The (revised) Native Courts Proclamation of 1943 repeated the stipulation that tribal courts had no jurisdiction over statutory offences; but it also provided that their warrants might be specially endorsed to allow them to deal with cases of witchcraft. Since the Proclamation was passed, the right to deal with such cases has been granted to the chief's courts of three tribes (BaNgwato, BaNgwaketse, and BaKgatla).¹⁷

In *Return to the Fairy Hill* Mitchison writes more explicitly than usual about her attitude to the irrational, comparing it with what she finds among the Batswana (people of Botswana).

All human beings are both rational and irrational. Let them deny the irrational part at their social and mental peril. But the irrational can be more or less strong, going from belief in sorcery to suspension of disbelief in fairies ... Where I have certain concepts in my

¹⁵ NM, 'Journey to Shetland', *New Shetlander*, 12 (Voar 1950), 23-5 (23).

¹⁶ NM, *Return to the Fairy Hill* (Heinemann, 1966), pp. 24-6. Hereafter *RFH*.

¹⁷ Isaac Schapera, 'Sorcery and Witchcraft in Bechuanaland', *African Affairs*, 51 (January 1952), 41-52. The BaKgatla or Bakgatla was Mitchison's tribe.

unconscious, for instance, magic and the Fairy Hill which I use as a main symbol in this book, my Batswana friends have other concepts but also including a 'they', a 'not us', highly comparable to certain aspects of the Celtic fairies, the Sidhe. (*RFH*, p. 2)

In Africa, as elsewhere, she records inexplicable experiences. One at least predates her Botswana connection.

Early in 1957 I was in Nigeria ... Here I had an odd time trying to get photographs of the Ibibio wood-carved monuments to the recent dead. My guide warned me that a photograph would not come out, as the dead would not like it. But they were fascinating monuments ... I really wanted those photographs. But sure enough, they were all fogged, although the others on that film came out well. (*MA*, p. 115)

In 1974 she reports that 'nearly four years ago' she consulted 'a *ngaka*, an African doctor' (i.e., a practitioner of African medicine, a healer) about a troublesome shoulder sprain. He was able to help this and other ailments, possibly by manipulation, but possibly, Mitchison believes (or half believes), with the help of

... the Badimo, the ancestral spirits, mediators between mankind and Modimo, who might be called God or natural force or what you will ... I had some reason myself to trust the Badimo who, being called upon on my behalf, had visited me in a formal dream, abruptly changing my mental condition for the better and perhaps being responsible for a startling improvement in the healing of my fractured femur. Perhaps. Possibly. If. At my age one should be able to suspend disbelief.

However, when the healer has a sore throat, Mitchison takes some pleasure in giving him penicillin tablets.

Half an hour later he said he felt his throat was cured. I told him it was faith and he laughed and agreed. 'Faith is half the cure', he said.¹⁸

The short stories collected in *Images of Africa* (1980) all have themes of sorcery and witchcraft, viewed from the perspective of the Batswana themselves. An uncollected story, 'Flour from the Wizard's Wood Ashes', written early in Mitchison's African involvement, has the further interest that its central characters are Europeans trying to rationalise an event, or an

¹⁸ NM, 'An African Doctor', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 315 (1974), 312-17.

alleged event, which, if true, would be inexplicable. The narrator is visiting her friend Janet on an agricultural station in West Africa. Janet complains that her steward Elias insists on getting the household's flour from a wizard.

'The fact is, my dear, the sack seems just to be full of wood ashes. ... This wizard ... tells Elias he mustn't open the sack for a fortnight. During that fortnight the magic works and the ashes turn into flour.'

This is clearly impossible, and when the women experiment by opening the sack ahead of time the transformation does not occur. They try, but fail, to persuade Elias that the wizard has been deceiving his customers all along. Yet this European explanation does not quite hold water either, and no definite conclusion is reached.

There must be a rational explanation ... Because if there wasn't a rational explanation – well, one couldn't just sit back and have a lot of magic happening all round, could one? ... As always, in the background, there was the noise of drumming from the village, a criss-cross of rhythms. One of the great yellow and black butterflies flapped across, as improbable as if one had made it up out of one's head. Anything might be true.¹⁹

It is tempting to see the unnamed narrator, eminently rational yet open to atmosphere and suggestion, as a version of Mitchison herself.

So far the supernatural or quasi-supernatural experiences in Mitchison's life have been surveyed in roughly chronological order. Her childhood fears (which continued into adolescence and well beyond) merit closer examination.

It is clear from her memoirs that she tried very hard to find a rational explanation for her nightmares and terrors. The chapter in *All Change Here* which she entitles 'Inside Naomi Haldane' (*ACH*, pp. 92-100) examines these experiences from several angles. She considers them further in the extensive notes to her novel *The Bull Calves*, framing her remarks in this instance as a general discussion of a child's perception of terrors, but, it seems clear, drawing on her own experience.

¹⁹ NM, 'Flour from the Wizard's Wood Ashes', *Glasgow Herald*, 12 December 1964, p. 10.

Children are often insecure, and that although they live in circumstances of physical security. Small children do not make any clear mental distinction between animate and inanimate objects. They cannot or will not understand the rational explanations of their elders, possibly because these leave out something which should, for full reality, be in. ... These children may be attacked by desperate fears. ... Such children, in silent desperation hidden from loving and rational parents, ... will make peculiar bargains with the torturers. If for a night they can be exempted from terror they will knock their heads against the bars of the cot, they will lie rigid, will time their breathing, or worse yet.²⁰

As Mitchison grew up she began to find parallels in her reading to some of her nightmarish experiences, and to take some comfort from these discoveries.

It suddenly came to me that Ovid had shared certain of my experiences: 'Executior somno, simulacraque noctis adoro'. [I am roused from sleep and beseech the phantoms of the night.]²¹ Yes, simulacra, those were the nightmares, that was the word for them, the things that forced one to fear and worship. (*ST*, p. 61)

Similarly she found mirrors which were 'not to be trusted' in George MacDonald's fantasy *Phantastes*. This novel, which made a considerable impression on the child Naomi (*ST*, p. 20), will be discussed in chapter 2. Elsewhere she came upon 'passages in which it was clear that the authors were describing, and had experienced, my kind of thing: fairly often in Kipling short stories, occasionally in Wells, Eden Philpott or Buchan' (*ACH*, p. 92).

The difficulty for the researcher is to establish exactly what 'my kind of thing' may have been, since Mitchison, frequently as she refers to quasi-supernatural events or appearances, seldom describes them in detail. It seems that at times her experiences went beyond the region of nightmare into some form of hallucination, in that she actually 'saw things'. In the view of Thomas de Quincey, almost a century earlier, this was far from unusual in childhood.

I know not whether my reader is aware that many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness, all sorts

²⁰ NM, *The Bull Calves* (Jonathan Cape, 1947), pp. 501-2. Hereafter *BC*.

²¹ The quotation is from Ovid, *Heroides*, Letter XIII, Laodamia to Protesilaus, line 111. Thanks to Hamish Whyte for this information and for supplying a translation.

of phantoms; in some, that power is simply a mechanic affection of the eye; others have a voluntary, or a semi-voluntary power to dismiss or to summon them; or, as a child once said to me when I questioned him on this matter, 'I can tell them to go, and they go; but sometimes they come, when I don't tell them to come.'²²

It is the coming unsummoned which is the terrifying thing.

Rudyard Kipling as a child, worn out by years of mental and physical abuse from a sadistic foster-mother, underwent a similar experience: 'Some sort of nervous break-down followed, for I imagined I saw shadows and things that were not there, and they worried me more than the Woman'.²³ Mitchison discussed the question in later life with her friend the psychotherapist Eric Strauss.

... Eric asking me, almost point blank, if I think there is another world of some kind; he has to treat his patients orthodoxly, saying their apparitions are from their own mind and so on, but he half thinks they may be real or rather external. I say I don't know and don't see any possibility of making certain which are from within and which from without, the way bits of one's anima can be detached and take on strange shapes. (*AYTN*, p. 260)

The Jungian concept of the anima is an important element in Mitchison's novel *The Bull Calves*, to be discussed in chapter 4, which she was writing during the period covered in *Among You Taking Notes*.

Meanwhile we may note the appearance of 'strange shapes' before the eyes of the central character in John Buchan's short story 'The Herd of Standlan'.

'I maun hae been geyan weak, for I got into a kind o' doze, no sleepin', ye understaun, but awfu' like it. And then a' sort o' daft things began to dance afore my een. Witches and bogles and brownies and things oot o' the Bible, and leviathans and brazen bulls – a' cam fleerin' and flauntin' on the tap o' the water, straucht afore me.'²⁴

²² Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, ed. by Grevil Lindop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 67. [Originally published 1822]

²³ Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* (Macmillan, 1937), p. 17.

²⁴ John Buchan, 'The Herd of Standlan', in *The Watcher by the Threshold*, ed. by Andrew Lownie (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 43-55 (48) [Originally published 1896]

The description is extremely close to some of Mitchison's observations in 'Inside Naomi Haldane': 'a condition which was not sleep or dreaming, since I was often perfectly conscious of the external world and sometimes even had my eyes open' (*ACH*, p. 94). It also resembles the 'appearances' seen by Kirstie in *The Bull Calves*:

'And syne the appearances began ... I would be sitting alone and a thing would flitter in through a shut window and out through a shut door. And times it would be a thing of lightness, yet no' a right, sunny brightness, but a hot dancing gleid out of hell! And times it would be like a bairn, but aye hell-marked in body or soul. ... And times they would be grey kinds of wisps and tags with something of corruption about them ...' (*BC*, p. 164)

Buchan and Kipling were also sensitive, like Mitchison, to the spirit of place. The concept of a *temenos*, a sacred spot, perceived to retain psychic traces of earlier inhabitants, occurs in several of Buchan's short stories, for instance 'No-Man's Land' and 'The Green Glen'.²⁵ Kipling wrote his 1909 short story 'The House Surgeon' after an experience shared by his wife and himself in 1896 when they were house-hunting in Torquay. In his autobiography he describes how they found a house which seemed 'almost too good to be true', and rented it, only to be assailed by

a growing depression which enveloped us both – a gathering blackness of mind and sorrow of the heart ... It was the Feng-shui – the Spirit of the house itself – that darkened the sunshine and fell upon us every time we entered, checking the very words on our lips ... More than thirty years later on a motor-trip we ventured down the steep little road to that house, and met, almost unchanged, the gardener and his wife in the large, open, sunny stable-yard, and, quite unchanged, the same brooding Spirit of deep, deep Despondency within the open, lit rooms.²⁶

Similarly, the biographer of the novelists Mary and Jane Findlater cites a 'strange encounter' in their childhood, 'at Lochearnhead on a smiling summer's afternoon'.

²⁵ John Buchan, 'No-Man's Land' (1898; in *The Watcher by the Threshold*, 1902); 'The Green Glen' (1912; in *The Moon Endureth*, 1912); see *The Watcher by the Threshold* (1997), pp. 187-235, 337-60.

Mary and Jane ... proceeded along their path without a thought of danger or distress. Then suddenly, unaccountably and simultaneously [sic], the whole day seemed to darken and Fear rose, like a great sinister force. It was so tangible and inescapable that they used to wonder in more mature years ... whether indeed some dreadful thing had been done upon those slopes. ...²⁷

Having mentioned, as cited above, several authors who seemed to be describing her 'kind of thing', Mitchison adds a more specific reference.

The last time I remember being struck in the same kind of way was in the last chapter of *The Teachings of Don Juan*, a book which had interested me very much. I read this at Mochudi in Botswana, in 1972, by candlelight certainly, but in my friendly white-washed rondavel where I could normally feel nothing but goodness and safety. At the end of the book I took a tablet of librium, but had the father and mother of a nightmare, one of the old kind. (ACH, p. 92)

The book she names, first published in 1968, was an influential text of the New Age.²⁸ The anthropologist Carlos Castaneda recounts his experiences as the apprentice of an old Mexican Yaqui Indian, don Juan, learning the secrets of 'the Yaqui way of knowledge' through the use of psychedelic drugs. In the last chapter, which so affected Mitchison, Castaneda is waiting outside don Juan's house. Though don Juan emerges as expected, he does not look or behave quite like himself.

It was his voice, but not his tone, or his usual words ... [He] sat next to the door ... that was not his spot, and don Juan would never under any circumstances sit anywhere else ... I saw his eyes looking through half-closed eyelids. I jumped up; I knew then that whoever, or whatever, was in front of me was not don Juan. (pp. 177-80)

As the known and admired figure of don Juan shows disorienting signs of being somebody else, the episode emanates a disturbing sense of insecurity. Mitchison has referred, in the note to *The Bull Calves* quoted above, to the fact (in her view) that 'children are often insecure'. It is possible

²⁶ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, pp.133-4. 'The House Surgeon': see Kipling, *Short Stories: volume I* (Penguin, 1971), pp. 194-220.

²⁷ Eileen Mackenzie, *The Findlater sisters: literature and friendship* (John Murray, 1964), p. 15.

²⁸ Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui way of knowledge* (Penguin Arkana Books, 1990). [Originally published 1968]

to hypothesise that a sense of insecurity, particularly in the area of personal relations, was continually present in her own emotional life. In Carradale, her sense of acceptance by local men – ‘this conscious happiness was on me, this trust’ (*AYTN*, p. 156) – is later seen to be illusory: ‘I was prickly and black with hate and misery and the feeling that I had been betrayed’ (*AYTN*, p. 244). In Botswana she writes about her relationship with the young chief in terms which raise the suspicion that she protests too much.

Sometimes I have been half afraid, feeling I had somehow done the wrong thing ... But now I know this is an incorrect judgement. Even if, between now and the next time I go back, he never writes me a single letter, I shall be fully assured that it doesn’t matter, that I can count completely on the relationship that unfolds like a flower, that is deeper rooted than a great tree. (*RFH*, p. 197)

In Mitchison’s short story ‘Adventure in the Debateable Land’, the narrator, moving between the real world of 1930s London and a surreal fairytale one, finds that her children (the names are those of Mitchison’s real-life family) are sometimes ‘not themselves’ in a very similar way to don Juan.

Lois had suggested a dressing-up game and, before I could stop her, picked up and put on my cloak of invisibility – and disappeared. ... Had I, for that matter, any real reason for supposing that it had actually been Lois at all? And was this really Avrion who had, with that much too innocent look, suddenly eaten the magic apple? ... I strongly suspected that the children were really the Other Side, so cleverly disguised that I couldn’t tell.²⁹

In *The Teachings of Don Juan*, all seems normal next morning: don Juan has returned to his normal self, and explains that the creature of the night was a *diablero*, a shape-shifting sorcerer. Castaneda, the narrator, is inclined to think that the whole thing was a test, in which his mentor ‘behaved in front of me in so skilful a manner that he created the clear and sustained impression that he was not really himself, but someone impersonating him’ (p. 174). That evening, however, in the course of a further lesson:

I found myself alone. I had run up a slope and was out of breath. I was perspiring freely, and yet I was cold. I called don Juan several times,

²⁹ NM, ‘Adventure in the Debateable Land’, *The Fourth Pig* (Constable, 1936), pp. 197-216 (206). Hereafter *FP*.

but he did not answer, and I began to experience a strange apprehension. I heard a rustling in the underbrush as if someone was coming towards me. I listened attentively, but the noise stopped. Then it came again, louder and closer. At that moment it occurred to me that the events of the preceding night were going to be repeated. In a matter of a few seconds my fear grew out of all proportion. The rustle in the underbrush got closer, and my strength waned. I wanted to scream or weep, run away or faint. My knees sagged; I fell to the ground, whining. I could not even close my eyes. (pp. 184-5)

While Mitchison does not specify exactly what part of the chapter gave her 'the father and mother of a nightmare', this passage seems a contender. The dreadful thing is not what happens, but what is going to happen. Though, as we have said, Mitchison seldom describes her nightmare experiences, she has captured this quality of impending horror in her poem 'Pause in the Corrida'.

... I slept ten hours last night.
If I sleep late I often have bad dreams.
This morning, then,
Dozing, I saw a hideous and malignant face –
Knew I was in for a nightmare –
Tried to bolt – knew it could catch me – began to put
In gear all mechanisms of fear and horror –³⁰

Such feelings of absolute horror, for Mitchison as for Castaneda, do not come only during sleep. Stanley Robertson, one of the Scottish travelling people, has recorded his version of the experience, apparently common in his family.

'Indian Death' is a term that I use and ma granny an ma mither used for when you go to your bed at night an suddenly you waken up and the room's icy cold, an things happen an you're aware of it. ... An A'd say tae myself, 'Have I fell asleep or am I in an Indian Death?' And then – 'at's aa richt, but it's fit comes in 'e door, 'is is the horror, it's whit comes intae the door!³¹

For such apparently widespread yet unexplained experiences an explanation must surely be sought.

³⁰ NM, 'Pause in the Corrida', *FP*, pp. 237-40 (239)

³¹ *Tocher* no. 40, 1986, p. 181; from School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh) tape SA 1979/21.

Most of Castaneda's experiences are episodes of altered consciousness brought about by hallucinogens (peyote, jimson weed and 'magic mushrooms'). Mitchison's childhood terrors clearly cannot arise from this source, though, teasing away at the problem in 'Inside Naomi Haldane', she does speculate about the ingredients in cough lozenges (*ACH*, pp. 93-4). As an adult in the 1960s, not having made the experiment previously because 'I find junkies such a bore and their literary productions negligible', she tries 'Indian hemp' (marijuana or hashish), suitably enough in India, just after watching a 'Mythological', a popular type of Indian film (cf the more usual term 'Western'). She is slightly disappointed at the result.

Suresh stood over me till I swallowed it down. Then he watched. They all watched hopefully. But nothing happened ... They kept on asking me if I didn't notice anything. After a while Suresh prepared another dose and I spooned it in. And still, still no enchanting visions occurred.

She awakens after a night when her dreams were 'nothing out of the ordinary', feeling very dizzy and sick.

And now, 12 [sic] hours after, the Mythological began regurgitating itself out of the memory traces in my brain ... The hallucinations were very mild. When I opened my eyes, the room was normal but swimming. When I shut them there was an unpleasant pressure and crowding of pointless imagery which could only have stimulated one to composing a third-rate film.

She has at one point, however, felt convinced that she can solve all the problems of the world 'including the secret of insect genetics', and decides to try again, with the Sikhs in Amritsar, where the hashish is more palatably served 'with nuts, cream, honey and poppy seeds'.³²

Very much less pleasant was her experience with mescaline, a drug obtained from the peyote cactus (one of the sources of hallucinogens used by Castaneda). No full published account of this has been traced.³³ Mitchison occasionally refers to it in interviews or autobiographical writing.

³² NM, 'A Taste of Indian Hemp', *Glasgow Herald*, 8 January 1966, p. 8.

³³ A 32-page unpublished and undated typescript account of an experiment with mescaline, 'Yet it Shall be Tempest Tost', is among Mitchison's papers in the National Library of Scotland (NLS Acc 10461/21; see Lloyd, p. 233).

An early, medically controlled experiment with mescaline resulted in an horrific experience which left her with a sense of her world 'tilted at a wrong angle to itself'. It was several distressing years before the world reoriented itself. 'Certainly if I'd known what was going to happen, I'd never have done it.'³⁴

The occasion of this experiment seems to be identified in a casual remark recalled by the then literary editor of *The Scotsman* at the time of Mitchison's death.

'I've never liked stations [says Mitchison] ... Ever since that time I was getting on a train, and all the other passengers seemed to have wooden heads. ... It was when I was experimenting with mescaline with Aldous, you know.'³⁵

Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) brought mescaline use to the attention of a wide audience. Huxley describes his own enjoyable and illuminating experience with the drug, reassuring potential users:

Most takers of mescaline experience only the heavenly part of schizophrenia. The drug brings hell and purgatory only to those who have had a recent case of jaundice, or who suffer from periodical depression or a chronic anxiety. ... [T]he reasonably healthy person knows in advance that, so far as he is concerned, mescaline is completely innocuous. ... Fortified by this knowledge, he embarks upon the experience without fear.³⁶

It seems possible that Mitchison, ever eager for new experiences, was 'fortified by this knowledge' as she embarked on her mescaline experiment. Unfortunately she proved to be one of the minority for whom mescaline was not innocuous, recalling in 1966 a further dimension of the 'hell and purgatory' she found:

Obsession is when one's whole being is swung out of normal, when one is shifted on one's base of memories and prejudices, when one is not, as it were, 'oneself'. I had experienced this for nearly a year after my mescaline jag ... downwards, hell-wards into misery. (*RFH*, p. 72)

³⁴ 'NM talking with Alison Hennegan', *Writing Lives: conversations between women writers*, ed. Mary Chamberlain (Virago, 1988), pp. 170-80 (179).

³⁵ Catherine Lockerbie, 'Volume Control', *Scotsman*, 16 January 1999.

³⁶ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (Flamingo, 1994), pp. 36-7. [*Doors of Perception* originally published 1954.]

She does suggest a possible reason for the bad trip:

Quite probably my bad reaction to it was simply that I was taking it alone, as an observed guinea-pig, and, because I was myself the prime observer, I could never let go. If I had been among people with whom I had a common feeling, a subliminal trust, I might well have had [a good] experience ... (RFH, p. 249)

The actual reason, like the cause of her terrors and nightmares, can only be guessed at, but her suggestion brings to mind again the different occasions in her life – notably in Carradale and in Botswana – when she thought, or hoped, that she was ‘among people with whom I had ... a subliminal trust’.

Mitchison’s nightmares were regularly accompanied by physical symptoms. She writes in adulthood of ‘a kind of pressure at the back of my head, the same I used to get as a child after frightening nightmare’ (AYTN, p. 59) and of rheumatism in ‘the base of the spine, the place from which, it seemed to me, my nightmares normally sprang’ (RFH, p. 67). (We may compare the character in the Kipling short story ‘An Habitation Enforced’ who is warned of the recurrence of nervous collapse by ‘a familiar sensation at the back of the neck’)³⁷ Mitchison considers the possibility of a physical cause for the terrors.

But how well was I? Or any of us? It was taken for granted that one would from time to time during the winter months have a bad cold, an earache or a cough that went on and on ... There was something very peculiar and alarming about [the nightmares] ... I was held, unable to move, while something rushed by or through me ... This was sometimes preceded by a tension, not quite pain, but a feeling of alarm and distress, equally in the base of the skull ... [I]t seems possible that it was a very mild form of *petit mal* ... Conditions of ill health probably made a good breeding ground for nightmares and obsessions. (ACH, pp. 93-5)

In the early pages of *Small Talk* she records, this time without seeking an explanation, one further peculiarity which may be noted. She is writing about the appearances, the ‘simulacra’:

³⁷ Kipling, ‘An Habitation Enforced’ (1905); see *Short Stories: volume I* (1971), 117-52.

‘They’ who appeared in dreams and in triangular shapes which I recognised with alarm in Gabon metal work many years later ... (ST, p. 9)

Why should the nightmares of an Oxford child be replicated in West African art? There is an explanation, employed to powerful effect by Alan Garner in his novel *Strandloper*³⁸. Garner’s central character William recognises patterns in the stained-glass windows of Marton parish church in Cheshire which are identical to those he has earlier seen during a migraine attack (p. 21, pp. 28-9), and also to the face-painting ritually used by Australian aborigines (p. 123, pp.199-200). An essay by Garner provides a useful précis of the theory of entoptic lines, upon which he stumbled by chance during the writing of the novel, and which supplied a scientific explanation for the symbolic unities he knew to be necessary to his story.

Entoptic lines were first published [sic] by two South African anthropologists, J.D. Lewis-Wilson [sic: see footnote] and T.A. Dowson,³⁹ [who] had noticed that the same abstract patterns tended to appear in all preliterate art and iconography, in all places and at all times ... There are about six patterns, and they are invariable ... [They] consulted neurologists who reported the same patterns, which are found in three conditions of the human brain. They appear to be projected as external images by people entering *grand mal* epileptic seizures; by many migraineurs; and as the result of shamans entering trance or ecstatic states.⁴⁰

In accounts of the subject (on which research continues) different classes of entoptic phenomena are distinguished. *Phosphenes* arise within the eye if, for instance, pressure is applied to the eyeball, resulting in the effect commonly known as ‘seeing stars’.⁴¹ *Form constants* appear to originate within the brain, and are the patterns seen under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, and also in primitive art.⁴² Either or both of these phenomena may be called ‘hallucinations’, and may be the explanation of

³⁸ Alan Garner, *Strandloper* (Harvill Press, 1996).

³⁹ J.D. Lewis-Williams and T.A. Dowson, ‘The signs of all times’, *Current Anthropology*, 29 (1988), 201-45.

⁴⁰ Alan Garner, ‘The Voice that Thunders’, in his *The Voice that Thunders* (Harvill, 1997), pp. 223-41 (239).

⁴¹ Gerald Oster, ‘Phosphenes’, *Scientific American*, 222 (1970), 83-7.

‘reports of phantoms and ghosts’ (Oster, p. 83) or of such diverse manifestations as the visions of Joan of Arc and the flashes of light seen by astronauts (Siegel, p. 132).

Thus ‘seeing things’ is a phenomenon found in all ages and cultures, and the ‘things’ may be of similar appearance whether seen by a small girl in Edwardian Oxford or by craftsmen in Gabon. Further, while acknowledging that the phenomenon may arise from the use of mind-altering drugs, researchers have found a range of other possible causes.

... alcohol, carbon dioxide, cocaine, cortisol, digitalis, scopolamine, and even tobacco with a high concentration of nicotine (Siegel, p. 132).

... toxins such as those associated with scarlet fever (Oster, p. 84).

... fatigue, sensory deprivation, intense concentration, auditory driving, migraine, schizophrenia, hyperventilation, and rhythmic movement (Lewis-Williams and Dowson, p. 202).

It appears probable that some of these factors were present in the conditions prevailing in Mitchison’s childhood – some, indeed, are considered by her in the passages quoted above – and that there may have been an underlying physical cause for her terrifying ‘simulacra’.

She was, in lay terms, clearly an imaginative and gifted child. The ‘simulacra’ or hallucinations, whatever their cause, together with the episodes involving fairies and the mystical hare which she apparently perceived as having occurred, seem to have reinforced her imaginative tendency and established a certain mind-set receptive to the possibility of an ‘irrational’ element in life.

As she left childhood, another dimension of the irrational became accessible to her through an experience to which she alludes several times in her memoir of adolescence. She was fourteen when her governess took her on an educational trip to Rouen.

... and here an explosive aesthetic experience overtook me. ... Rouen Cathedral, St Ouen, the clock, the *patisserie*, the thought of Joan of Arc, bound to the stake by soldiers, all combined into a riot of feeling, an alteration of consciousness which I find hard to explain and cannot recover or describe; I only know it happened and that, from time to time

⁴² Ronald K. Siegel, ‘Hallucinations’, *Scientific American*, 237 (1977), 132-40.

in my life, something of the same sort has happened. I drank and drank in the colours of the glass, twined myself into the traceries, quite unable to express any of it ... (ACH, pp. 23-4)

Aldous Huxley's writing on hallucinations and visions in *Heaven and Hell* (1956), a sequel to *The Doors of Perception*, supplies a possible explanation.

Glass is hardly less effective as an inducer of visions than are the natural gems. ... Thanks to glass, a whole building – the Sainte-Chapelle, for example, the cathedrals of Chartres and Sens – could be turned into something magical and transporting.⁴³

Huxley links 'visions' with hypnosis, which can be brought about by staring at a light source or following a regular pattern ('the traceries'?) with the eyes. It may be noted that the character Su in Mitchison's novel *The Big House* slips into an altered state – metamorphosis into a swan – by following, in a similar kind of mild hypnosis, the tracery of a Celtic knot pattern.

He broke the lines of the cross here and there, rubbing them out with his thumb, joining the broken lines to one another, so that they made a continuous line. You had to look very quickly to see how it was going, moving your eyes, skimming along the lines, no, that wasn't quick enough, running, flying –⁴⁴

A final reference in *All Change Here* to the Rouen experience seems significant in the context of Mitchison's life as a writer. The partial exorcism of the childhood terrors when the sixteen-year-old Naomi Haldane spoke of them to her future husband Dick Mitchison has been noted earlier in this chapter. Mitchison continues:

What I experienced was an extraordinary sense of relief. ... What I did not realise was that, in partial – at least – breaking of a relationship between myself and my nightmares, I had inevitably started an equally deep counter-relationship between myself and Mitch, and that this relationship would key in with Rouen Cathedral, the tension and the delight. (ACH, p. 96)

⁴³ Huxley, p. 79. [*Heaven and Hell* originally published 1956.]

⁴⁴ NM, *The Big House* (Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 109. Hereafter *BH*.

Thus the Rouen experience, inexplicable and therefore irrational to her at the time, resonates with sexual 'tension and delight'. As discussed in chapter 2, Mitchison comes to link it specifically with the reading of poetry, which makes a direct contribution to her development as a writer. This must point towards the possibility that, in Mitchison's perception, sexuality, creativity and the irrational are interconnected, an idea which will be examined later in this thesis.

This chapter has examined various 'irrational' experiences during Mitchison's life, as they are recorded in her autobiographical writing. From her accounts it can be seen that for some experiences she sought natural explanations, while others she appears to attribute to supernatural causes; yet she is never entirely convinced on either side. 'Perhaps. Possibly. If,' she writes.

The next chapter will survey literary influences, such as her early reading, which in some cases provide her with psychological explanations for myths and beliefs, but in others treat supernatural events as reality. Thus both life and literature contribute to a continuing uncertainty in Mitchison's mind about the existence of irrational forces, and this uncertainty will be reflected in her own writing.

CHAPTER 2

Supernatural and myth in the writing of Naomi Mitchison: sources and contexts

I have smelt the breath of the sow-faced Mother,
Have watched the Wanderer weigh his staff,
Have heard in the dusk the jay voice laugh,
Saying: one thing leads to another.
Out of the wolf pit run the green children.¹

This thesis considers the occurrence and treatment of supernatural and mythical themes in the fiction of Naomi Mitchison. Particular attention will be paid to the 'Scottish fiction' of the 1940s and 1950s, but, as noted in the Introduction, the supernatural is a recurrent feature throughout her work.

Mitchison's prolific output of fiction does include novels and short stories with no supernatural element, but even in her first published novel, *The Conquered* (1923)², a carefully researched depiction of Gaul in the first century BC which refers tacitly to the political situation in Ireland in the 1920s, an element of magic is introduced into an apparently realistic narrative. At the end of the novel (p. 284) the central character Meromic is transformed into a wolf, the totem animal of his tribe. The reader may be prepared to agree with a critic who sees this as an unexpected development and a rather clumsy expedient by the writer:

There are no easy answers for Meromic ... [NM] eases her way out of the novel's dilemma by invoking a magical resolution: Meromic becomes his atavistic totem, a wolf ...³

¹ From NM, 'Yes, But', *New Statesman* 47 (1954), 636.

² NM, *The Conquered* (Cape Florin Books, 1932; first published Jonathan Cape, 1923). Hereafter C.

³ Benton, p. 42.

But this is a mistaken judgment. The old storyteller who oversees (or brings about) the transformation of Meromic has been a recurrent figure in the narrative (pp. 26-30, 141, 268-9). There has been reference to a sacred grove of oak trees and the sacrifice of a hare to 'the Shining One' (pp. 118-21), early examples of Mitchison's indebtedness to Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which will be discussed later in this chapter. A background of myth, together with a perceived possibility of magic, is present throughout the novel. Mitchison shows notable confidence as a first-time novelist in assuming that the reader will understand and accept this.

Her other assumption, that the parallels between Gaul/Rome in 58-46 BC and Ireland/Britain in the early twentieth century will be immediately grasped, was not so rash as it may appear today. The chapter epigraphs, mainly from Irish poetry and Republican songs, give a clear direction, and in 1923, when the novel was published, the events in the struggle for Irish home rule, leading up to the contentious establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, were still fresh in her readers' minds. 'The life of Meromic ... is a life which has had many incarnations,' writes the political theorist Ernest Barker in his preface to the novel (p. 10). If Meromic is regarded as a generic Celt without specific location in time or place, then his transformation, in final despair, into his ancestral totem animal has considerable meaning and resonance.

It has been noted in chapter 1 that Mitchison was apparently prepared to acknowledge the occurrence of irrational events on the margins of everyday life, and *The Conquered* supplies an early indication that a similar attitude is to be found in her writing. The scenario of a community or society operating within a structure of myth appears again and again in her fiction, from Marob in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* to Port Sonas in *Lobsters on the Agenda*. Her discovery of such a situation in real life in Africa is celebrated in *Return to the Fairy Hill*. Her poem 'Up Loch Fyne', evoking a moment of epiphany in a framework of routine duties, signals recognition and welcome of a mythic quality as a necessary dimension in life.

The humped grey fish-watcher has become with one wing flap

The elegant trailing heron that Hokusai dreamed up,
Far from Loch Fyne.
May my own squat and spear-beaked mind
Fishing and gulping its needs among weedy statistics
Or in the dazzle of every-day reflections and refractions,
Sometimes take wing and re-create a myth. (CK, p. 27)

Mitchison's concept of the supernatural and its presentation in her work can be seen to be influenced by her perceptions as a child and adolescent. Naomi Haldane was an imaginative child. Mitchison as an adult recognises this in her memoirs, and acknowledges the benefit, despite the concurrent disadvantages, which such a disposition confers on a writer.

Years later ... [Aunt Bay] said I was the only Haldane to have this kind of runaway imagination, something which now she loved and respected. But it was a misery then. And indeed can be still, though without it I would have no wings. (ST, pp. 33-4)⁴

Her vivid dreams, often with the quality of nightmare, both arose from and contributed to Mitchison's life of the imagination. She is by no means unique among writers in this, particularly if it is accepted that some at least of her dreams may be attributed to illness or to the use of medicinal drugs. In that case the field of comparison extends from the work of Coleridge and De Quincey to Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, dictated to his amanuensis under the influence of massive doses of opium; the opium and hashish use of Baudelaire; Rimbaud's experiments in 'disorientation of the senses'; and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*, the essentials of which came to him during restless sleep. In the twentieth century, Hugh MacDiarmid likens the excitement of 'thinkin' o' Scotland' to that derived from drugs:

It's like having – hashish, is it?
Huh? Nae mescaline quickens and expands the spirit
As the quiet-seemin' Borders dae to folk
Prood o' the glories they inherit and transmit.⁵

⁴ Pace Aunt Bay, Mitchison elsewhere credits her brother Jack with 'the irrational streak' (ACH, p. 96) and notes her son Avrion as a child 'seeing things which were invisible to others' (YMWA, p. 27).

Like many children, Naomi Haldane began to spin her imaginings into stories, and Mitchison as an adult recalls that some of these led directly to early attempts at writing.

... the vast area of stories told to myself which I know went on for years and finally turned into writing story books ... some may have risen out of the books I read; it is also possible that some may have been a dip into a changed state of consciousness ... certainly I could get somewhere, so to speak, else, and might have to be recalled and told I was dreaming. (*ST*, p. 130)

Beyond the usual definition of nightmare are the hallucinatory 'appearances' recorded in Mitchison's memoirs. They too contribute to her fiction, as she recognises:

The appearances ... were still around. And are, though not so obtrusively, and as one grows older one finds means of making them work for one, as in a number of episodes in *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves*. (*ACH*, p. 92)⁶

She also recognises the role played in her writing by the sensitivity to the spirit of place discussed in chapter 1, acknowledging the moment in a train outside Rome cited there, when she 'felt entered into by the ghost of a girl', as the direct source of one of her stories: 'I wrote a story to lay that ghost.' (*MA*, pp. 15-16) 'Laeta', subtitled 'Rome, AD 304-AD 1923'⁷, is, in spite of its visionary origin, a fairly straightforward historical narrative, told in the sweet naïve voice of the girl Laeta, which grows cloying over the course of a story rather too long for its content. It is of interest because its inspiration is so clearly documented, but Mitchison is not here making the attempt to integrate the irrational and reality which, as will be seen in chapter 3, characterises her slightly later novel *We Have Been Warned*.

Mitchison's 'explosive aesthetic experience' in Rouen (*ACH*, pp. 23-4) has been discussed in chapter 1. Though it was not strictly a supernatural experience, it seems to have resulted in an alteration of consciousness similar

⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Borders', *Complete Poems*, II, ed. by Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet Press and Ashington: Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1994), pp. 1423-30 (1427).

⁶ The episodes in question will be considered in later chapters.

to those she recognises in her nightmares and in her childhood episodes of telling stories to herself. In her memoir of adolescence she links it explicitly with the reading of poetry: 'I think that what I looked for in poetry was magic, the light through Rouen Cathedral windows ...' (*ACH*, p. 39) Her reading in childhood and adolescence should therefore be examined alongside her supernatural and quasi-supernatural experiences as a further contributory factor to the supernatural element in her writing.

Mitchison's early reading: George MacDonald, the ballads and J.G. Frazer

Mitchison's reading at this period (as in later life) was catholic in scope and largely unguided. 'All those years I read and read. ... My reading was very mixed' (*ACH*, p. 35). Donald Smith categorises her reading material as 'a thoroughly Edwardian list'.⁸ In strictly chronological terms, her childhood reading was bound to be 'Edwardian', since she was already twelve years old by the end of Edward VII's reign in 1910, but the libraries she refers to in her own overview of her reading (*ACH*, pp. 35-42), in her parents' house at Oxford and her grandmother's house of Cloan, do have a culturally Edwardian if not Victorian air.

They had their limitations: 'It is most improbable that there was a Hopkins among the poetry books in our house' (p. 40). Her reading was censored 'spasmodically', generally for perceived sexual content (she mentions as forbidden H.G. Wells's *The New Machiavelli*, 1911, and Fielding's *Tom Jones*, 1749), but she was allowed to read M.R. James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904) – 'There would have been a case for censoring this, at least to me' (pp. 37-8) – and the equally disturbing stories of Poe. In addition, she remarks, 'I was at the same time reading a fair

⁷ NM, 'Laeta', *Barbarian Stories* (Jonathan Cape, 1929), pp. 133-52.

⁸ D.A. Smith, *Possible worlds: the fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982), p. 4.

amount of rubbish', this definition covering Gene Stratton Porter, Bulwer Lytton, and such 'popular, but actually rather bad writers' (pp. 36-7).⁹

But the scope of her reading is much wider than that implies. She specifically names R.L. Stevenson as a stylistic influence on her own writing: 'What I liked were *The Wrong Box*, *Island Nights' Entertainments*, and the *Fables*' (p. 37). She also acknowledges a technical debt to Kipling, to add to their common perception of spirit of place:

The straight descriptions in *Kim*, *Rewards and Fairies*, and many other Kipling novels and stories, are written with superb clarity and colour. My own early writing is closely and even embarrassingly modelled on Kipling; one could do worse. (p. 36)

Further influences are indicated almost casually in discussing various religions which interested her during adolescence.

In different adolescent moods, Apollo, Artemis, Dionysos, or even the grey-eyed Athene, found a temporary votary. I still thought highly of the Norse pantheon, fed by versions of sagas. And I was beginning to involve myself with the Celts, first through *Celtic Fairy Tales*, then through Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men*. And there was a book about Isis and Osiris which I much enjoyed. ... Then of course there were all those fascinating Swinburnian deities ... I suppose I read all Gilbert Murray's translations of Greek plays ... (*ACH*, pp. 97-8)

Her offhand dismissal of Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, may be explained by the fact that the Murrays were at one time next-door neighbours of the Haldanes (*ST*, pp. 90-1); this is the atmosphere in which the young Naomi grew up. Her flippancy on the subject of Swinburnian deities, however, indicates a disavowal of her adolescent enthusiasm for Swinburne. To some extent, writing her memoirs in old age, she regards this with amusement:

Sometimes Frances and I danced together, doing what we supposed were very daring mimes: 'The lovers whose lips would excite thee, Are serpents in hell.' How serpentinely we writhed! (*ACH*, p. 39)

⁹ Gene Stratton Porter (1863-1924), whose moralistic romances include *Freckles* (1904); Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-73), a prolific writer possibly best remembered for his novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834).

More serious, if still ironically presented, are her reflections on the earliest days of marriage, for which a knowledge of Swinburne proved far from adequate preparation.

We were both virgins ... Not unnaturally we did not do very well by one another. ... The final act left me on edge and uncomfortable. Why was it so unlike Swinburne? Where were the raptures and roses? Was it going to be like this all my life? I began to run a temperature. (*YMWA*, p. 69)

She had married at eighteen, with little experience to set against her 'Edwardian' reading. Though she continued to read and appreciate poetry, she had now discovered that Swinburne's poetry, at least, was not exactly like life, and perhaps that Swinburne's deities, at least, were not to be relied on: early examples of the perceived anomalies which later inform her writing.

While her interest in Egyptian, Greek and other religions, together with the childhood reading of Plato's *Republic* to which she refers elsewhere (*ACH*, pp. 40-41), is clearly reflected in her novels and short stories of the 1920s and early 1930s set in classical and early modern times, it is particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis to note her early exposure to Celtic folklore. 'Celtic Fairy Tales' probably refers to one or both of the collections by Joseph Jacobs, *Celtic Fairy Tales* (1892) and *More Celtic Fairy Tales* (1894), which Mitchison elsewhere cites by author: 'There were other and more genuine fairies in the Jacobs collection with the notes which of course I read' (*ST*, p. 51).¹⁰ *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) is a collection of Irish legends retold by Lady [Augusta] Gregory, a friend and collaborator of W.B. Yeats.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912), a family friend who, as noted in chapter 1, encouraged Mitchison as a child to experiment in the field of the paranormal, published twelve volumes of collected fairy tales, *The Blue Fairy Book* and its colour-coded sequels, between 1889 and 1910. Mitchison read though 'never much cared for' them (*ST*, p. 51). It seems probable that she also knew his anthropological writing, such as *Custom and Myth* (1884) and *Myth*,

Ritual and Religion (1887), since her interest in anthropology and comparative religion was, as discussed later, aroused early by her reading of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

She did know the allegorical fantasy *Phantastes* (1858) by the Scottish writer George MacDonald (1824-1905).¹¹ '*Phantastes* ... affected me deeply with its concern about beauty and guilt' (ST, p. 20). On his twenty-first birthday, Anodos – whose name may mean 'pathless', though other interpretations are possible – opens an old desk, an heirloom from his father. Inside he finds a beautiful woman, at first tiny but then growing to full human size (rather as Princess Leia first appears in the film *Star Wars*). Next morning, not quite sure why, he sets out on a quest to Fairy Land [sic], pursuing a beautiful white lady. At times she is almost within reach, but he loses her again; he is not always allowed to touch her, though he can sing her from a marble effigy into life (pp. 71, 206-7). Her identity, and the overall meaning of *Phantastes*, have been much debated.¹²

Since the journey begins when Anodos awakes to find his bedroom transformed into a magic forest, some commentators suggest that the whole story is a dream. Yet this is not borne out by the ending, in which Anodos returns home and finds he has been away in real time.

My sisters received me with unspeakable joy; but I suspect they observed some change in me ... They had been in great distress about me ... I had been gone, they told me, twenty-one days. (pp. 316-17)

The implication is that he has in fact been in fairyland, lured or invited there like Tam Lin or Thomas the Rhymer in the Scottish ballads, or like the many humans in Irish folklore who return after being 'away'; a reinforcement for Mitchison's concept of the fairy hill, discussed in chapters 5 and 8. (We

¹⁰ These notes cover many of the folklore elements later found in NM's work, for instance fairy lovers, changelings and swan maidens.

¹¹ George MacDonald, *Phantastes: a Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. (Azure, 2002). [Originally published 1858]

¹² See Adrian Gunther, 'Phantastes: the first two chapters', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 21 (1994), 32-43.

shall find that the number seven and its multiples are significant in the interaction between humans and fairyland.)

Phantastes, an early work in the genre of fantasy, has demonstrably influenced later writers. The imagined worlds of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have resemblances and affinities. The magic forest in Narnia reached by going through the wardrobe in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) may be related to the wood into which Anodos's bedroom is transformed. The malevolent Old Man Willow and the deceitful trees of Mirkwood in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) derive even more clearly from MacDonald's evil Ash and the Maid of the Alder.

MacDonald's influence on the fiction of Naomi Mitchison may take a less concrete form than these easily recognisable correspondences. It amounts, perhaps, to an overall awareness of duality and ambiguity. The concept of duality can be seen in MacDonald's depiction of the lady of the beech-tree, who is sometimes 'a very beautiful woman' (p. 56) and sometimes 'a superb beech-tree' (p. 60). She is, in fact, an example of metamorphosis, an idea which will be examined in chapter 8, together with Mitchison's use of it in the story 'Five Men and a Swan'. Though her form varies, however, the Beech is in her nature always good.

More disturbing is the concept of ambiguity, when the outer form is as it should be, or as expected, but the inner nature is in doubt, as in Mitchison's short story 'Adventure in the Debateable Land' and the episode of uncertainty in Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*, discussed in chapter 1. Anodos experiences just such insecurity on one of his encounters with the white lady.

'It is your white lady!' said the sweetest voice, in reply ... Yet, if I would have confessed it, there was something either in the sound of the voice, although it seemed sweetness itself, or else in this yielding which awaited no gradation of gentle approaches, that did not vibrate harmoniously with the beat of my inward music. And likewise when, taking her hand in mine, I drew closer to her, looking for the beauty of her face, which, indeed, I found too plenteously, a cold shiver ran through me ... (pp. 79-80)

Anodos is further unsettled when he sees that the whites of the lady's eyes are faintly tinged with pink, and his misgivings are justified, for she is the sinister Maid of the Alder. In the dawn light she is revealed as 'a strange horrible object ... a rough representation of the human form, only hollow, as if made of decaying bark torn from a tree' (p. 84), the kind of nightmarish figure which appears to have haunted Mitchison's dreams and which makes its way into her writing.

Two other possible debts to *Phantastes* in Mitchison's work may be suggested. The mysterious shadow which accompanies Anodos on much of his journey may perhaps have resonated with her when she discovered the Jungian concept of the shadow, the dark side of a person's nature, containing aspects which he or she cannot acknowledge or admit. Her use of Jungian theory in her major novel *The Bull Calves* will be discussed in chapter 4. It may even be possible that the winged women encountered by Anodos contribute something to Mitchison's concept of swan maidens, considered in chapter 8:

The men alone have arms; the women have only wings. Resplendent wings are they ... From those that [were born] in winter go great white wings, white as snow ... The sea is like a sea of death ... Yet the women sport in its waters like gorgeous sea-birds (pp. 148-50).

Donald Smith attributes a certain old-fashioned quality in Mitchison's writing style to what he sees as the somewhat limited scope of her childhood reading.

Her fundamental literary instincts derive from [Edwardian] writers ... [Their] mixture of radical thinking with literary conservatism marks all of Naomi Mitchison's work.¹³

To overstress this view, however, would be to ignore another influence which Mitchison herself acknowledges in summarising her childhood reading: '[M]y main enthusiasm was always poetry' (*ACH*, p. 38). Some at least of that poetry is much earlier, and much stranger, than the Edwardian

¹³ Smith. *Possible Worlds*, pp. 5-6.

fiction which Smith deplores. As was the case in her prose reading, Mitchison as a child and adolescent read what poetry she could find, and from that picked out what she liked.

I read the Victorians, lots of Tennyson and Browning, ... Rossetti and a number of minor authors and finally Swinburne ... I read very little Shelley ... I couldn't be doing with Wordsworth, nor yet Milton ... I liked Coleridge, but my reading did not go much earlier, except for the ballads. (pp. 38-9)

'The ballads' appear to have become part of the furniture of Mitchison's mind and of her aesthetic sensibility. It is in connection with them that she draws comparisons between poetry and her Rouen Cathedral experience.

My last prize from school and the only one that is still with me was the *Oxford Book of Ballads*. I swam around in these ... I think that what I looked for in poetry was magic, the light through Rouen Cathedral windows ... : '*It fell about the Martinmas when nights are lang and mirk*' [Mitchison's italics]. Lyrics and ballads provided this fuel. I now ask myself, was I looking for the equivalent of a drug experience in altered consciousness? If so, would some of our present teenage addicts find that poetry isn't bad for getting high on? But to do this it probably has to have a very definite rhythm and evocative force. (p. 39)

She is referring principally to the Scottish border ballads (though similar ballads occur in other areas of Scotland and on the English border)¹⁴ which are distinguished by two features in particular: their simple, strong, and rhythmical style, and their confident handling of supernatural themes. Both these elements can be seen as having considerable influence on Mitchison's work. She essays the incantatory quality of the ballads in much of her poetry. Occasionally she approaches pastiche, though this is sometimes deliberate.¹⁵ At other times she successfully captures the rhythmic simplicity of the ballads along with their freight of folklore, tradition and sensuality.

Comrade, comrade, come away
Down to the Midsummer apple bough
Who you are, I can scarcely say,
Only know you are here and now

¹⁴ See Emily Lyle ed., *Scottish Ballads* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994).

¹⁵ See the discussion of NM's poem 'Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man' in chapter 8.

Under the Midsummer apple bough.

Here's the apple for us to share
Under the Midsummer apple tree.
Priests and schools have said, beware,
Shame and sin and death, all three
Hang from the Midsummer apple tree. ...¹⁶

Beyond this, it is worth noting that, in the ballads, magic is an element always potentially present in everyday life. The Wife of Usher's Well in the ballad of that title¹⁷ is introduced as an ordinary, if well-to-do, Borders woman.

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them oer the sea.

In stanza 2 she is described as a 'carlin wife', and the first definition of *carlin* or *carline* in *The Scottish National Dictionary* is simply 'A woman, generally an old woman ...' though the second is 'A witch.'¹⁸ By stanza 4, the wife is more clearly to be recognised as a witch, invoking the threat of supernatural tempests (like the witches in *Macbeth*) to achieve the return of her sons; yet when they do return, in stanza 7, she welcomes them as she would any guest, by mending the fire and preparing a meal. When they leave, in stanza 12, the homely everyday note is sounded again, as they bid farewell to their mother, the farm, and the bonny servant-maid. Almost casually, in stanzas 5 and 6, they have been identified by a single detail as being not earthly guests, but ghosts. Stanza 5 opens with the two lines which Mitchison cites to epitomise the 'magic' she found in the ballads.

It fell about the Martinmass,
When nights are lang and mirk,
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,
And their hats were o the birk.

¹⁶ NM, 'The Midsummer Apple Tree', in *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Routledge, 1996), pp. 79-80. [Originally published *Time and Tide*, 1 July 1933]

¹⁷ Lyle, pp. 118-19.

¹⁸ *The Scottish National Dictionary*, ed. by William Grant and David D. Murison. Compact ed., 2 vols (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press for the Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1986). [Originally published 10 vols, 1931-76.]

It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
Nor yet in any sheugh;
But at the gates o Paradise,
That birk grew fair eneugh.

The attitude taken in the ballads, that magical events occur with some regularity alongside and at the same time as the everyday events of real life, fits well with Mitchison's apparent attitude to irrational events. The plain language of the ballads provides an everyday background against which the supernatural beings and events appear with heightened effect. This is also Mitchison's method. In her early historical novels she uses colloquial twentieth-century dialogue throughout, at the time an innovative technique.

Oddly enough I was the first to see that one could write historical novels in a modern idiom: in fact it was the only way I could write them. Now everybody does, so it is no longer interesting. (*YMWA*, pp. 163-4)

The supernatural occurrences in her fiction are similarly described with deliberate flatness.

Now, Hat was a man that took things as they came, and he had been a skipper fifteen years, and his wife died a while back, leaving him with one lassie that was away training to be a nurse and another lassie at school yet; but the school lassie would be asleep in the back room now. So Hat took up the swan's dress and away with it to his house ...¹⁹

In Hat's ability to '[take] things as they came' Mitchison successfully replicates the matter-of-fact acceptance of magic (and of sexuality) found in the ballads. Not all her characters, however, are equally ready to accommodate both magic and modernity in their mid-twentieth century lives. Mitchison's handling of this recurrent problem will be examined in chapter 7.

Almost as early as her reading of the ballads, according to Mitchison's own account, was her first acquaintance with Sir James George Frazer's magnum opus *The Golden Bough*, a work of considerable importance in the

formation of her views on myth and in the treatment of the supernatural and myth in her writing.²⁰

I am not quite sure when Grannie [NM's maternal grandmother] died, but it was certainly several years after we moved to Cherwell. I had been old enough to talk to her about books and it was she who introduced me to *The Golden Bough*. (ACH, p. 28)

The move to Cherwell took place when Mitchison was nine years old, in 1907 (ST, p. 15). Since the abridged edition of *The Golden Bough* did not appear until 1922,²¹ it was the full twelve-volume edition published between 1906 and 1915 which Mitchison read while still a child or an adolescent.

I think I am about the only person alive who has read through the whole of *The Golden Bough*, though ... I read it almost as fairy tales. My grandmother, of all people, my Trotter grandmother, had the whole big edition ... and I just read it all through, and some of it stuck.²²

Given the conventional scope of the family libraries she was exploring and the intermittent censorship of her reading, it is perhaps surprising (as she tacitly acknowledges here) that she was allowed – apparently encouraged by her grandmother – to read *The Golden Bough*. In contrast is the reaction of a librarian in Dublin to the adolescent Sean O'Casey's request for the work: 'If it's anything like what you make it out to be, it's neither a safe nor a proper book to have knocking about here'.²³

The ideas it contains have been summarised thus:

Each year nature dies. People too weaken and then expire. These events are connected, and the force that connects them is magic. ... [K]ings, in whom much of the energy of the community is invested, are able to orchestrate the process. ... There is a force of energy within them which, if diminished by illness or death, will diminish everyone along with it. The force, however, transcends them and is transferable from individual to individual. If, when the period of their weakness is upon

¹⁹ NM, 'Five Men and a Swan', *Five Men and a Swan* (Allen and Unwin, 1957), pp. 93-110 (95). Hereafter *FMS*.

²⁰ Sir J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a study in magic and religion*. 1st ed., 2 vols, 1890; 2nd ed., 3 vols, 1900; 3rd ed., 12 vols, 1906-15. Page references are to the Oxford World's Classics 1 vol. abridged edition, ed. by Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²¹ Frazer, p. xlv.

²² *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p. 78.

²³ Frazer, p. ix.

them, kings can be forced to relinquish their power, it can then be handed on to a different human vessel who will ensure its survival.²⁴

This is the theory of the divine king who must die for his people. While, thus briefly stated, it may seem tame enough, several aspects of its development in Frazer's multi-volume work were of a sort to alarm Victorian and Edwardian society. First were the extensive and detailed descriptions of customs and rituals among 'savages' (Frazer's term), often, in the nature of the thesis, relating to fertility, puberty and childbirth. Next was the question of taboo, a range of practices and prohibitions aimed at the preservation of the power of the sacred king, which, as Frazer demonstrated at length, were connected with these primal rituals. Victorian society operated on its own intricate system of social taboos, and its members did not relish the idea that these might be akin to the customs of 'savages'. Last and most disturbing was Frazer's thesis that all religion derived from the beliefs and practices of magic, including the Christian religion. In the second edition of 1900 he developed his theory of the scapegoat – the surrogate who, in some cultures, died in place of the king – to the point of presenting the crucifixion of Christ as merely an example of that custom. The suggestion caused such offence that it was relegated to an appendix in the third edition and omitted in the abridged edition of 1922.²⁵

The ideas which offended some readers, however, interested and excited many others. Among these were writers and thinkers. The influence of *The Golden Bough* on the literature of the twentieth century has been immense. Frazer's concepts of sympathetic magic, taboo, the god-king and the scapegoat have been traced in the work of Yeats, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, Synge, and many more.²⁶

²⁴ Frazer, p. xxi.

²⁵ Frazer, pp. xxv-xxvi

²⁶ See Robert Fraser, ed., *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination* (Macmillan, 1990).

A perhaps unexpected reference is that in Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*.²⁷ Outwardly it consists of a single remark made to Philip Marlowe by an alcoholic novelist:

'Ever read *The Golden Bough*? No, too long for you. Shorter version though. Ought to read it. Proves our sexual habits are pure convention ...' (p. 212)

Marlowe does not comment and the reader may think the passage is irrelevant. But there is a scapegoat figure in the novel, Terry Lennox, who effectively returns from the dead (twice). Marlowe and he have been friends of a sort, but at the end of the novel Marlowe does not want to see him again: 'It's just that you're not here any more. You're long gone.' (p. 320) (In the 1970s film version, Marlowe rather more explicitly shoots him.) Since Marlowe himself is famously a knight errant, it may be that in repudiating the scapegoat figure he is privileging the active mythic hero (the knight/himself) over the passive sacrificial hero (the scapegoat/Christ/Terry).

Frazer's influence can undoubtedly be seen in the work of Naomi Mitchison. Perhaps it is most evident in her major novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931).²⁸ The title itself signals an indebtedness, and the Frazerian rituals of Plowing Eve (pp. 238-49) and Harvest (pp. 288-99) are dramatically presented.

Then before the eyes of all Marob he jerked the strips of stuff sideways and away from himself. For one moment all the growers of corn could look on the hard and upright sign of the godhead on their Chief and Corn King. Then still to the squealing of pipes he threw his hands up like a diver and all his body curved and shot downwards towards her. She did not feel his weight because of the tension in her own skin from head to heels. In the convention of the dance and in a solid noise of drums the Corn opened the Furrow, broke into the Spring, and started the Year. (p. 245)

Then came the great moment in the Corn Play when the Spring Queen takes the sickle and cuts the corn, and IT must die and be mourned for before IT can rise again. Yet every one in Marob had faith that IT would rise! How else could they live?

²⁷ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Good-Bye* (Penguin, 1959). [Originally published 1953]

²⁸ NM, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (Jonathan Cape, 1931). Hereafter CKSQ.

So the Spring Queen took the sickle of bronze and gold and the people of Marob saw her go to lay it lightly on the throat of the other actor in his green rabbit-skins, and this would be the symbol of death and waiting and winter. (pp. 293-4)

These ceremonies are described largely, though not exclusively, from the viewpoint of Erif Der, the Spring Queen. The critic Jill Benton sees this as a riposte by Mitchison to Frazer: 'To Frazer [she] says that women witches and magic are powerful cohesive agents networking all communities'. The importance of the woman is, in fact, acknowledged by Frazer: see, for instance, his chapters 'Demeter and Persephone' (pp. 405-10) and 'The Corn-Mother and Corn-Maiden' (pp. 417-34). Benton is right, however, in pointing out that Mitchison, though indebted to Frazer, has her own agenda, and that Erif Der is a strong woman character outside her role as Spring Queen. In the harvest ritual quoted above, she kills, in reality and not just symbolically, her own father, who is playing the corn figure, in revenge for the death of her baby. Her quest as a female hero has already begun, and in the remainder of the book it takes her through the Hellenic world to Delphi, Sparta and Egypt. Benton comments: '*The Corn King and the Spring Queen* links all stages of Western history with the curve of female *Bildungsroman*'.²⁹

Frazer's influence on Mitchison extends beyond *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. It seems probable that she found in *The Golden Bough* the idea of sympathetic magic which is a keystone of his thesis, or at least that his tabulation of this principle reinforced ideas which she had already found in fairy tales and folklore. Frazer postulates that sympathetic magic consists of the Law of Similarity, whereby the magician produces an effect by imitating it (for instance, he can cause pain by sticking pins in the image of a person), and the Law of Contact, whereby harm done to an object will affect the person with whom the object was once in contact (for instance, a person can be harmed by damage to his hair-cuttings or nail-clippings).³⁰ Mitchison had possibly already found examples of such practices in the folklore of the

²⁹ Benton, p. 65.

³⁰ Frazer, pp. 26-59.

Strathearn region around her grandmother's home of Cloan, and would find others later in the folklore of Carradale. She was perhaps the more inclined to recognise and accept them, and to use them in her fiction, since they had been enshrined in *The Golden Bough*.

Mitchison is far from being the only Scottish writer of her time who can be seen to be influenced by the ideas of Frazer. An early case is that of John Buchan. His short story 'The Grove of Ashtaroth', dated 1910 and published in his collection *The Moon Endureth* (1912), is patently indebted to Frazer.³¹ In the opening pages of *The Golden Bough* we learn of an 'old and famous sanctuary' of the goddess Diana (or Artemis): 'It was known as the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis, that is, Diana of the Wood, or, perhaps more exactly, Diana of the Woodland Glade'.³² Buchan's transfer of the grove from Italy to a wooded valley in South Africa is perfectly in accordance with Frazer's views on the universality of beliefs:

In the very centre of the glen, in a loop of the stream, was one copse which even in that half light struck me as different from the others. It was of tall, slim, fairy-like trees, the kind of wood the monks painted in old missals. No, I rejected the thought. It was no Christian wood. It was not a copse, but a 'grove' – one such as Artemis may have flitted through in the moonlight. (p. 196)

In its original collection the story is immediately followed by the poem 'Wood Magic' with its similar central image:

... Down by the edge of the firs, in a coppice of heath and vine,
Is an old moss-grown altar, shaded by briar and bloom.
Denys, the priest, hath told me 'twas the lord Apollo's shrine
In the days ere Christ came down from God to the Virgin's womb ...
(pp. 225-6)

The speaker, who reckons that 'gods are kittle cattle, and a wise man honours them all', is adopting the very attitude of *The Golden Bough*.

³¹ John Buchan, 'The Grove of Ashtaroth', *The Moon Endureth* (Nelson, 1923). [Originally published 1912]

³² Frazer, p. 10.

Equally Frazerian are Buchan's novels *The Dancing Floor* (1926), whose hero finds himself cast in the role of the priest-king to be sacrificed, and *Witch Wood* (1927), which, since it is particularly indebted to Frazer's follower Margaret Murray, will be considered in Appendix I. The critic Christopher Harvie goes beyond these titles to find the influence of Frazer in other Buchan novels, and indeed in Buchan's approach to matters of politics and statecraft.³³

The Scottish Literary Renaissance

The Frazerian novels by Buchan fall chronologically within the period of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, which is considered to have begun in the 1920s and continued until the 1950s. Commentators have noticed that through the fabric of this movement runs a thread of magic and mythology.

The element of the supernatural, previously noted in the ballads, is a well-established feature of Scottish literature in general. In fiction, to name only a few outstanding nineteenth-century examples, it can be traced through the work of James Hogg (*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, 1824), Walter Scott ('Wandering Willie's Tale', in *Redgauntlet*, 1824), George MacDonald (*Phantastes*, 1858), R.L. Stevenson ('Thrawn Janet', 1881), and Margaret Oliphant ('The Open Door', 1882). By the 1920s and 1930s, the still recurrent elements of folklore and legend have acquired nuances which can be traced to Frazer. Most notably, the blending of the irrational with Frazerian ideas is present in the novels and short stories of Neil M. Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Eric Linklater and Naomi Mitchison.

The tradition in general is clearly seen to continue in other major writing of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Hugh MacDiarmid's great poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) is a dream or a vision, haunted by a mysterious presence:

But ilka evenin' fey and fremt
(Is it a dream nae wauk'nin' proves?)
As to a trystin'-place undreamt

³³ Christopher Harvie, "'For Gods are Kittle Cattle': Frazer and John Buchan', *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, pp. 253-69.

A silken leddy darkly moves.³⁴

In several haunting short stories from the 1920s and 1930s,³⁵ MacDiarmid taps folklore and childhood fears to present, for instance, the outwardly inoffensive Miss Beattie who 'wasna to be trustit' and tries to prevent a visiting child from leaving her house ('Old Miss Beattie', pp. 136-9), and the terrifying being who appears in the guise of someone's lost child or sweetheart: 'Mebbe it'll be your turn next' ('A'Body's Lassie', pp. 157-61).

William Soutar's 'The Auld Tree'³⁶ celebrates the Scottish Literary Renaissance itself in a richly-textured dream poem which includes the wasteland myth (discussed further below) and the ballad theme of mortal sojourns in fairyland. Soutar is clear that these deep sources nourish the 'auld tree' of modern Scotland, of which the literary renaissance is a vital part. In examining the question of supernatural and mythical elements in the work of Naomi Mitchison, it is therefore essential to consider her writing in the context of the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

From today's perspective that may seem self-evident, considering the chronology of her writing career, which begins in 1923, in the earliest period of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, and extends over (and beyond) the full course of the movement. Yet the situation did not seem so clear at the time, as acknowledged by both Mitchison and her interviewers in a conversation of 1984.

Bob Tait: The fact that there you were writing in the 1920s and you say you came across MacDiarmid's poetry rather by accident: that suggests it must have taken some time at least before MacDiarmid's claims for what he was doing impinged on you in any serious way.

NM: Yes.

BT: To what extent *did* you take MacDiarmid's claims to reconstitute a specifically Scottish culture seriously, in the end?

NM: Not much. *[laughter]*

³⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 24-113 (32).

³⁵ See Hugh MacDiarmid, *Annals of the Five Senses, and other stories, sketches and plays*, ed. by Roderick Watson and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999).

³⁶ William Soutar, *Into a Room: Selected Poems of William Soutar*, ed. by Carl MacDougall and Douglas Gifford (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2000), pp. 83-93.

BT: That's my impression. [laughter]

Isobel Murray: It interests me that you weren't really *with* any of the Scottish writers at this time, and yet, looking back, it is possible to discern an almost archaeological interest going through. ... One wonders whether there is some common need being felt and understood.

NM: Well, I think in a sense we were making something to stand on. A rock.³⁷

In the early 1930s it seemed doubtful to the Scottish literary world whether Mitchison was to be considered as part of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, or even as a Scottish writer. She was currently prominent on the London literary scene and writing fiction with little or no Scottish content. She was not the only writer about whom such doubts were expressed. Eric Linklater comments tartly in 1932, contributing to a symposium on Scottish letters in the wide-ranging survey *Scotland in Quest of her Youth*:

Scotland hears with indifference that an excellent novel has been written by a man called Ronald Fraser; a play of outstanding merit by someone called Mackenzie; and that a succession of masterpieces are the work of a lady whose maiden name was Haldane. For these successes, and many others, have been scored on English ground ... The authors are Scots, or of Scottish origin, but their work is held to be English. ... I do not know who are Scottish writers and who are not.³⁸

Lewis Grassie Gibbon, writing in 1934, knows who are Scottish writers: they are few in number (he rules out, among others, Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir, Willa Muir, John Buchan, Catherine Carswell and Eric Linklater), and they do not include Naomi Mitchison.

The chief Literary Lights which modern Scotland claims to light up the scene of her night are in reality no more than the commendable writers of the interesting English county of Scotshire.

Let us consider Mrs Naomi Mitchison. She is the one writer of the 'historical' novel in modern English who commands respect and enthusiasm. ... *The Conquered* and *Black Sparta* light up the human spirit very vividly and truly. And they are in no sense Scots books though written by a Scotswoman. Their author once wrote that had she had the command of Scots speech possessed by Lewis Grassie Gibbon she would have written her Spartan books (at least) in Scots. Had she

³⁷ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, pp. 79-80.

³⁸ Eric Linklater in *Scotland in Quest of her Youth*, ed. by David Cleghorn Thomson (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1932), pp. 165-6.

done so they would undoubtedly have been worse novels – but they *would* have been Scots books by a Scots writer ...³⁹

Mitchison was, however, invited to contribute to the symposium in *Scotland in Quest of her Youth* as, in the editor's words, one of 'six friends whose judgment [on Scots letters] I value most', the others being George Blake, James Bridie, Carswell, Gunn and Linklater.⁴⁰ Though in 1932 she was still living in London, she had begun to discover, on holidays at Craignish in Argyll, evidence on Celtic myth and folklore to reinforce the knowledge acquired from her reading. Chapters 3-7 of this thesis will examine how this knowledge began to feed into her fiction, much of which, during the 1940s and 1950s, is set in Scotland. Her biographer Jenni Calder finds that the process was well under way by the late 1930s, when she became a full-time resident in Carradale.

She had already begun the process of rediscovering her Scottish identity ... In the years that followed, she created a new role for herself, as a Scottish writer deeply embedded in Scotland's past and deeply committed to Scotland's present.⁴¹

While Mitchison regards herself from this period onwards as a Scottish writer, it is more doubtful whether she felt accepted as part of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement. Indeed, her diary of the war years suggests that, living in remote Carradale and not publishing regularly in book form, she felt out of touch with the literary scene in general.

I think this body of poems I have written about Scotland are adding up to something pretty good, though the high-brows won't think so, and it is in a way hard to go on without encouragement from one's fellow writers. (AYTN, p. 145)

'The high-brows' is her usual term for London critics and fashionable writers; she adds 'I get [encouragement] from Neil Gunn though'.

³⁹ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Literary Lights', *A Scots Hairst*, ed. by Ian S. Munro (Hutchinson, 1967), pp. 141-56 (148). [Originally published 1934]

⁴⁰ *Scotland in Quest of her Youth*, p. 158. NM's contribution is on pp. 170-1.

⁴¹ Jenni Calder, 'More than merely ourselves: Naomi Mitchison', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 444-55 (445).

There is a related question, on which much research remains to be done, as to whether she wanted to be part of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement. As she indicates in the 1984 interview quoted above, she was aware from a fairly early stage of the movement and of its leading light Hugh MacDiarmid. In *Scotland in Quest of her Youth* she describes Hugh MacDiarmid as ‘far the most exciting poet which Scotland has produced for generations’ (p. 171). A year later, in 1933, she is aware of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, and ranks MacDiarmid with the other great Modernists Eliot and Joyce in her poem ‘The Historian and the Individuals’. (She also links the work of these writers with myth and folktale.)

Gold weather-cock, crow down to us, we are waiting in a row.
Here’s Kay and Gerda hand in hand, all dusted with the snow;
Here’s Sweeney in his shirt sleeves, and Mr Bloom in trousers,
And the camsteerie Thistle to prick up any drowzers;
And here’s the King of the Hoopoes, and there, oh there is
Basileia herself, the only Queen of the Fairies!⁴²

By 1945 the relationship between Mitchison and MacDiarmid, and perhaps that between Mitchison and the Scottish Literary Renaissance, has apparently changed. Possibly this can be ascribed to inevitable changes in the movement itself. In an article in the Glasgow-published little magazine *The New Scot* entitled ‘Post-War Prospects of Scottish Arts and Letters’ MacDiarmid refers slightly to ‘the would-be prophetic Mrs Naomi Mitchison’, implying that she has no competence in either Gaelic or Scots. The publishers, perhaps hoping for a flyting between these two habitually combative letter-writers, alerted Mitchison to his remarks, as she notes in her war diary for 24 January 1945.

... The Scottish Reconstruction Committee sent me a paper they have been writing with a rather silly and abusive article by Hugh MacDiarmid which they asked me to answer. I am not going to get involved in controversies with him, so I wrote them a short letter which I said they could print if they liked, not arguing, just giving a couple of sharp socks to the jaw. The man doesn’t even mention Gunn, just his crop of horrible young pseudo-poets who seem to appear like a mildew

⁴² NM, ‘The Historian and the Individuals’, *The Delicate Fire* (Jonathan Cape, 1933), pp. 335-7 (335-6).

at the moment. I wish him joy of them, and them of him. (*AYTN*, pp. 313-4)

Her brief reply as published begins 'I haven't got the spare time and energy to quarrel with "Hugh MacDiarmid"', and indicates that

... an article on Scottish Arts and Letters which leaves out Neil Gunn ... is so obviously incompetent and out of touch with what matters in Scots letters to all except a small clique, that it is not worth answering.

She refers dismissively, though not as dismissively as in her diary entry, to 'the MacDiarmid-Poetry-Scotland crowd', and this evokes a long, patronising 'Open Letter to Naomi Mitchison' from Maurice Lindsay, a poet of the second phase of the Scottish Literary Renaissance (and editor of the periodical *Poetry – Scotland*).

Obviously you have not read *Poetry – Scotland* very carefully ... Many of [its] poets, no less than you, dear lady, have sufficient inroads into their small writing time on account of the war. ... When next you feel tempted to retaliate ... please do not besmirch serious endeavours, which you have not taken the trouble to understand ... In any case, a walk round the garden is a much more effective anodyne!⁴³

In spite of differences and discontents, Mitchison warmly welcomes and praises the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement in her poem 'The Scottish Renaissance in Glasgow: 1935', and includes the poem in her 1978 collection *The Cleansing of the Knife*.

There is a thing being born as it was
born once in Florence:
So that a man, fearful, may find his mind fixed on tomorrow.
And tomorrow is strange for him, aye,
full of tearings and breakings,
And to the very middle he feels his whole spirit shaken.
But he goes on.⁴⁴

⁴³ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Post-War Prospects of Scottish Arts and Letters', *New Scot*, 1 ([1945]), 21-4; NM's reply, *New Scot*, 1(2) (1945), 8; Maurice Lindsay, 'An Open Letter to Naomi Mitchison', *New Scot*, 2 (January 1946), 11, 29.

⁴⁴ NM, 'The Scottish Renaissance in Glasgow: 1935', *CK*, p. 12. Bibliographies cite a poem of this title (excluding the date) in the periodical *London Mercury* (17 April 1928) and the anthology *Living Scottish Poets*, ed. by C.M. Grieve (1931). Comparison of the three texts has yet to be carried out.

It can now be seen that Mitchison's fiction has elements in common with that of other writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Seamus Heaney's observations on Hugh MacDiarmid are relevant also to Mitchison.

There is a demonstrable link between MacDiarmid's act of cultural resistance in the Scotland of the 1920s and the literary self-possession of writers such as Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and James Kelman in the 1980s and 1990s. He prepared the ground for a Scottish literature that would be self-critical and experimental in relation to its own inherited forms and idioms, but one that would also be stimulated by developments elsewhere in world literature.⁴⁵

As she suggests in the interview quoted above – 'in a sense we were making something to stand on' – Mitchison too was contributing to the foundation on which the 'self-possession' of modern Scottish literature would be based.

The affinity between Mitchison's work and that of other writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance is clear in her treatment of myth and the supernatural, influenced by Frazer as well as by traditional Scottish folklore. The Frazerian influence is sometimes indirect, for example through the writing of Jessie Weston, whose *From Ritual to Romance*⁴⁶ finds the idea of the god-king in the Grail legends of the Arthurian cycle. Weston's work is seen as influential in mid-twentieth century English literature, and Douglas Gifford traces its influence on writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance:

Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* ... was one of the links between the anthropologists and the writer, giving to Eliot, Lawrence and Joyce 'the wasteland myth': the belief common to these writers and Gunn and Gibbon (as well as many of the Scottish writers like Muir and MacDiarmid and Soutar) that modern man has backed himself into a spiritual cul-de-sac or wasteland in which no spiritual refreshment is attainable, since God's existence has been eliminated by reason.⁴⁷

Weston's work impressed Mitchison and is one of the sources of her Arthurian novel *To the Chapel Perilous* (1955): 'There was one very

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'A Torchlight Procession of One: On Hugh MacDiarmid', *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (Faber, 1995), pp. 103-23 (104).

⁴⁶ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). [Originally published 1920]

⁴⁷ Douglas Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1983), p. 3.

intelligent woman, Jessie Weston it was. I was affected by her book, *From Ritual to Romance*.⁴⁸ The novel begins on the edge of the wasteland.

... all round [the Chapel Perilous] for a space was desolate tumbled stone, scarcely growing even a shred of lichen ... Immediately beyond this waste land [sic] was the forest, but always in some equivocal season, so that one forgot if it was winter or summer.⁴⁹

As the Grail quest reaches a climax, the wasteland flowers (p. 23). After King Arthur's death 'what was quite clear was that the waste land was as waste as though it had never blossomed, waste and frightening' (p. 213). The hero and heroine learn that 'it blossoms with the ending of the quest, the finding of the Grail' (p. 217), and that, since there is more than one Grail, it will happen again and again. They approach the Chapel Perilous:

As the first grass blades began to push through the dry misery of the waste land, a bird appeared from nowhere, in the way small birds do when a person is looking for something else ... And by the time the sight of the bird, so attractively balancing itself above the newly bubbling spring, has been taken into the mind ... [t]here are flowers breaking through among the grass ... and after them the whole of spring rushing on and summer after it ... The land is no longer waste. (pp. 218-9)

To the Chapel Perilous is a rich, thoughtful and ultimately optimistic rendering of the wasteland theme.

A further influence on the writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance (including Mitchison, particularly in *The Bull Calves*) is the writing of Jung, who, like Freud, drew on *The Golden Bough*. While much of the work of J.M. Barrie, such as his plays *Peter Pan* (1904) and *Mary Rose* (1920), precedes the rise of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement, it is of interest to note a possible Jungian reading of his later novella *Farewell Miss Julie Logan*

⁴⁸ 'Interview with Naomi Mitchison [1989]', *Taliesin's Successors*, ed. by Raymond H. Thompson (University of Rochester Camelot Project), www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/cphome/stm

⁴⁹ NM, *To the Chapel Perilous* (Oakland, California: Green Knight Publishing, 1999), p. 14. [Originally published 1955] Hereafter *TCP*.

(1932).⁵⁰ This haunting, ambiguous tale of a young minister's encounter with a mysterious young woman is set during a Highland winter when

... the glen is 'locked', meaning it may be so happy in snow that no one who is in can get out of it, and no one who is out can get in. Then, according to the stories that crawl like mist among our hills, ... come forms called the 'Strangers'. (p. 7)

Miss Julie Logan may be one of the 'Strangers', a supernatural entity, but it is equally plausible, as a recent editor suggests, that

Adam Yestreen [the minister] projects his *anima*, to use the Jungian term for the feminine element, to mediate the external world and 'creates' Julie Logan instead of mediating the archetype internally to achieve equilibrium. (p. 91)

Douglas Gifford points out the relevance of Jung's concept of 'the collective unconscious' to the apparently supernatural experiences undergone by characters in the fiction of Gunn and Gibbon.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspects for the modern reader of writers such as Gunn, Gibbon, Linklater and Mitchison is to encounter in their work moments when rationality or the rules of biology and time are set aside. Some of the most powerful episodes in *Sunset Song* happen when central characters relive events from thousands of years before ... Similarly Gunn transcends time with Kenn in *Highland River* and Finn in *The Silver Darlings* to allow them to share in ancient pre-Christian experience.⁵¹

Such episodes are those in which Chris seems to see and hear a wild, half-naked man crying in Greek *The ships of Pythias!* (*Sunset Song*, pp. 41-2); Chae Strachan sees a strangely-dressed man with a cart which is 'no cart of the countryside' (*Sunset Song*, p. 158); or Finn sees the figure of a monk in the ruined monastery called the House of Peace (*The Silver Darlings*, p. 214).⁵² In each case there is some doubt in the character's mind whether the sighting can be attributed to a dream (or, in Chae's case, to the whisky),

⁵⁰ J.M. Barrie, *Farewell Miss Julie Logan*, ed. by Alistair McCleery (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press and Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1989). [Originally published 1932]

⁵¹ *Scottish Literature*, ed. by Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan and Alan MacGillivray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 723.

though the reader gains the impression that it has indeed been a vision of the past.

The case of Kenn in *Highland River* is somewhat different. As soon as he sees the great salmon, ‘... the whole world changed ... Out of that noiseless world in the grey of the morning, all his ancestors came at him’ (*Highland River*, p. 2).⁵³ He has not seen a vision, but a real fish (though, in the scheme of the novel, it is also the Celtic salmon of knowledge). He sees no ghosts, yet his ancestors are there. In such episodes Gifford sees the racial ‘great memory’ of Jung’s theory working in contemporary experience.

Past defines present; roots are deep and tenacious; contemporary individuals are powerless to resist the effects of tradition ... Standing stones, earthhouses, brochs and cairns ‘speak’ to their human descendants ...⁵⁴

This is perhaps another way of expressing the concept of ‘spirit of place’. It will be suggested in chapter 5 that Mitchison’s sense of the presence of earlier generations in a ruined township may have supplied the germ of her children’s novel *The Big House*. In that work, too, Mitchison may be seen to consider the concept of the past as an inescapable influence on the present, and, perhaps, to go beyond the perceptions of Gunn and Gibbon. Is it immutably true that ‘contemporary individuals are powerless to resist the effects of tradition’? Rather, if the tradition has been distorted to harmful effect, Mitchison suggests in *The Big House*, contemporary individuals are able – and are obligated – to resist such effects and rediscover an older and purer form of the collective unconscious.

Among the writers in whose work the reader finds disturbing moments, speaking of a disjunction of time and rationality, Gifford specifically includes both Mitchison and Eric Linklater. Linklater’s fiction, like Mitchison’s, ranges across so many styles and genres that it can be hard

⁵² Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Jarrolds, 1946) [*Sunset Song* originally published 1932]. Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (Faber, 1941).

⁵³ Neil M. Gunn, *Highland River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991) [Originally published 1937].

⁵⁴ *Scottish Literature*, ed. by Gifford, Dunnigan and McGillivray, p. 724.

to categorise. A perceptive introduction by the author's son to a selection of Linklater's short stories⁵⁵ isolates a quality in his work, perhaps tending to be overlooked in the diversity of his literary production, which places him thematically in the mainstream of the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

To judge by his short stories, Eric Linklater was a convinced, unwavering pagan. In selecting these examples ... it became obvious that for all their differences, they shared one fundamental relationship. Each bore the imprint of what could only be termed a pre-Christian imagination. This is not to say that my father was irreligious ... but rather that he believed equally strongly in the existence of ungodly powers. (p.vii)

In Linklater's short stories, as in the work of Gunn and Gibbon, myth and folklore are present and influential in contemporary everyday life. The picnickers in his light-hearted 'The Dancers' (pp. 27-41) are apparently untroubled by this situation: they meet the Peerie Men (Orkney fairies) at the summer solstice and are never seen again. But the narrators of other stories bring a mid-twentieth century scepticism to their accounts, and here Linklater's work has interesting resonances with that of Mitchison.

'The Goose Girl' (pp. 1-25) is a re-enactment of the story of Leda and the Swan in post-World War II Orkney. (Geese and swans can play a similar role in myth.⁵⁶) Shortly after the birth of his daughter the narrator finds a huge broken eggshell under the window of the house. He does not allow himself to explore the implications of his find. '... [T]here was no sense in it, and I didn't want to curse myself with a madman's doubt' (p. 18). In 'Sealskin Trousers' (pp. 43-56), a selkie story, the human who has apparently lost his fiancée to a seal-man needs again to reassure himself: 'I am not mad. It is necessary to realise that ...' (p. 43). The narrator in 'A Sociable Plover' (pp. 271-306), a doctor, equally clings to her certainty that the plover is simply a bird and not, as it begins to appear, a witch's fetch.

Through these three narrators Linklater is confronting the disjunction between the rational and the irrational, between science and the

⁵⁵ Eric Linklater, *The Goose Girl and other stories*, ed. by Andro Linklater (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991).

⁵⁶ See Edward A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds* (Collins, 1958), p. 46.

supernatural.⁵⁷ Linklater in fact foregrounds this ironically in 'Sealskin Trousers', where his educated seal-man presents what appears to be a scientific explanation for the transformation of human to selkie: '[T]he glands have got a lot to do in a full metamorphosis, the renal first and then the pituitary, as you would expect' (p. 52). (While Linklater studied medicine for a time at Aberdeen, it is to be assumed that the process of metamorphosis was not included in the syllabus.)

The same question seems to have troubled Mitchison. The central character in her short story 'Flour from the Wizard's Wood Ashes', cited in chapter 1, is puzzled and disturbed by something which, rationally, she knows cannot happen, and by its irruption into everyday life. Other examples will be discussed in an examination of Mitchison's short fiction in chapter 7. Such characters recognise the anomaly of irrational experiences in a modern world which is inimical to magic. In them, as much as in her specifically Arthurian fiction, Mitchison is referencing the wasteland myth.

The vein of the supernatural has continued into Scottish fiction of the late twentieth century. Douglas Gifford points out that many Scottish writers from the 1980s onward have

... insisted on reintroducing, albeit in different form from Renaissance usage, elements of magic and myth, employed for symbolic and social-political reasons.⁵⁸

Of these, he notes 'the inspiration of Naomi Mitchison' in the work of Margaret Elphinstone and Sian Hayton. The *Hidden Daughters* trilogy of Hayton, beginning with *Cells of Knowledge* (1989), sets the power of strong women, legendary Celtic giantesses, against that of a patriarchal early Christian church. Elphinstone's short stories in *An Apple from a Tree* (1991) critique contemporary Scotland, through magic, from a feminist viewpoint, while her novels *The Incomer* (1987) and *A Sparrow's Flight* (1989) are set in a post-apocalyptic Scotland and north England, perhaps a few years on from

⁵⁷ This question is considered at some length in Gunn's *Highland River*: see chapter 18, pp. 209-19.

the devastated post-nuclear community depicted in Mitchison's short story 'Remember Me'.⁵⁹

Magic, myth and the feminine

Careful reading of Mitchison's fiction suggests the existence of a complex relationship linking her view of the irrational, her view of herself (importantly, of herself as woman and mother), and her writing. Though the view is fairly usual among writers, she felt that her writing owed much to something from 'the outside'.

A writer of my own time and above all a writer of poetry has to be tuned or strung so as to pick up what comes from the outside, not merely visually nor yet rationally, but by the workings of empathy, whatever that is.⁶⁰

Similarly, writers are accustomed to say that a piece of work seemed 'given', or that a character 'came alive'. Mitchison uses the latter phrase (implicitly acknowledging it as something of a cliché) in relation to the character Black William in her 1947 novel *The Bull Calves*. There are secrets in William's past which he is not inclined to reveal to other characters: apparently they were revealed only gradually to the writer herself.

I was building up Black William at the beginning, and then I suddenly realised that he'd been telling lies all the time to me, his creator, and I mean I felt like God [*NM and interviewers laugh*], but it was very curious because I thought, this doesn't fit; this isn't quite right. What is happening? There it is: he just came alive.⁶¹

In another interview she claims that, on a voyage across the Atlantic, a complete novel, *To the Chapel Perilous*, effectively wrote itself.

It was as though there was a film going on inside my head, and I was watching it as it went by. I was completely immersed in this. I didn't

⁵⁸ Gifford, 'Imagining Scotlands', p. 17.

⁵⁹ NM, 'Remember Me', *What do you think yourself?* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1982), pp. 93-106. Hereafter *WDYTY*.

⁶⁰ NM, *Naomi Mitchison* (Saltire Self-Portraits 2.) (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1986), p. 3. Hereafter *SSP*.

⁶¹ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p. 95.

know what was coming, but it just came. I've never had quite the same feeling about anything else I wrote. It was very odd.⁶²

Ten years later her first African novel was, she felt, also 'given', though the circumstances of its writing were different. She was in the first flush of her enthusiasm for the society and people of Botswana, and in particular for the young chief Linchwe, whom she equates with her fictional Corn King. This relationship and its importance to her writing will be considered more closely in chapter 8, but one of the first fruits was the novel *When We Become Men* (1965), begun in Africa and completed in Scotland.

The novel had begun to show itself ... as a crystal ball, as something which I knew, which I now only had to write, to describe, to fill in. ... I started writing [it] on April 8th and finished on June 15th. ... This was all rather surprising and indeed alarming. I felt I had got into a state of obsession, almost dangerously close to a mental take-off. ... The most curious thing was that for most of the time I was being violently happy. ... In fact this was a state of Grace; like all states of Grace, it was totally undeserved. (*RFH*, pp. 67-9)

While such euphoria has been described by other writers, Mitchison appears also to have felt (logically enough, if the state of creativity is a state of grace) that while writing she was strengthened against the malevolent aspect of the irrational, the terrors which in her childhood memoir she calls 'They'.

Are other people's 'They' like mine? '*They*' said if you choose/To boil eggs in your shoes ... And, oh, that was what I always did! (*ST*, pp. 9-10)

Elsewhere she expands on this concept, relishing as a writer

... the feeling of being in a small gang against the rest of the world, the hostile 'They' whom Lear personified as the world-against-the-artist, the ones who ... banished the old man of Thermopylae who had done nothing more anti-social than boiling eggs in his shoes.⁶³

'They' in this view constitute the forces of conventionality. Throughout Mitchison's life she resisted conventionality in most forms, but in

⁶² Interview with Thompson, *Taliesin's Successors*.

particular the conventional role laid down for a woman in the early to mid twentieth century: that of, exclusively, wife and homemaker. She demonstrates her resistance in her diary of the war years, and even more effectively in her 1935 novel *We Have Been Warned*.

The diary entry, dated 21 January 1942, arises from her reading of the autobiography of the sculptor and engraver Eric Gill; currently, in difficult wartime conditions, she is struggling to write *The Bull Calves*.

... would old Gill admit that a woman can make a work of art at all? He doesn't. All his art adventures are between young men. The women are *there* certainly, very important, but in a world of their own, the world of conversation, of the house and farm and all. ... I have that world. I know it matters. It matters like hell ... But also I'm an artist, I'm aware. I'm an adventurer. (*AYTN*, p. 179)

The fictional expression of quietly urgent rebellion against 'that world' is supplied by Phoebe, one of the central characters in *We Have Been Warned*, an artist, wife and mother.

'When I've finished doing household,' she said, 'I'm going to work. I've got to get this job finished, so will you be angels and try not to let anybody disturb me till lunch?' ...

She went straight to the kitchen with a pencil and paper and dealt with her house, trying to concentrate on it and not keep on pulling towards the work she wanted to do. ...

Then she escaped; she let herself quietly out of the side door and quietly walked across the garden ... She was out of sight of the house; she ran, she bolted into her workroom and shut the door. Calm began to surround her again, the working peace of the craftsman.⁶⁴

Mitchison has described herself as 'someone who never clearly notices the gap between fact and imagination' (*YMWA*, p. 209), and if this can be said to apply to most of her fiction, it is nowhere more evident than in the relationship between herself and the central female characters in her major novels.

⁶³ NM, 'Writing the Historical Novel', *Scotland*, 13 (1948), 59-63 (62).

⁶⁴ NM, *We Have Been Warned* (Constable, 1935), pp. 160-1. Hereafter *WHBW*.

Mikhail Bakhtin has examined such relationships in an essay.⁶⁵ Observing that it is 'common practice even in serious and conscientious literary-historical scholarship to draw biographical material from literary works or, conversely, to explain a given work through biography', he suggests: 'What is constantly ignored in all such juxtapositions is that the whole of the author and the whole of the hero belong to different planes.' (p. 9) Explaining further, he states memorably: 'The author's consciousness is the consciousness of a consciousness, that is, a consciousness that *encompasses* the consciousness and the world of a hero' (p. 12); in other words, the author's relationship to the hero 'is a relationship in which the author occupies an intently maintained position *outside* the hero' (p. 14). Deviations from this 'deeply vital and dynamic relationship' tend to occur when the hero is 'essentially autobiographical' (p. 15).

Contemporary critics of *We Have Been Warned*, if they did not analyse the situation in such detail, did feel that Mitchison was not sufficiently outside her heroines, particularly Phoebe's sister Dione. While the picture of Phoebe escaping from her household duties dovetails with Mitchison's reflections on the life of a woman writer, Dione also resembles Mitchison in several aspects, being a wife and mother, politically aware, who goes on a fact-finding trip to the Soviet Union (as Mitchison did in 1932); her husband, like Dick Mitchison at the time, is a Labour Party candidate for a Midlands seat at a general election. A more recent reading, however, postulates that Mitchison does remain coolly outside Dione, judging and criticising the character and so, effectively, herself. The question will be examined further in chapter 3, while chapter 4 considers a similar situation with regard to Kirstie in *The Bull Calves*.

Erif Der in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* also strikes the reader as having much in common with her creator, and Mitchison has in fact acknowledged the connection in the case of the reporter Lienors in *To the Chapel Perilous*, a modern young woman in an Arthurian setting who takes

⁶⁵ M.M. Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 4-256.

an active part in events. '[S]he was a part of me, for when I'm writing a book the people are there inside me, and I've always done what I've wanted, in a way.'⁶⁶ There is also the intriguing figure of the female witch-doctor Malilo in the African story 'To Deal with Witches'.⁶⁷ She arrives in a village and clears up its witchcraft problem where several male witch-doctors have failed, but she is also 'a Party member' and is aware that the witches are mostly poor countryfolk. 'What have you and the Party done for them?' is her first question (p. 133), and before setting about her witch-finding duties she recommends planting fruit trees and starting a small co-operative. Surprising her superstitiously awestruck audience, this is remarkably reminiscent of the mixture of political theory, belief (or half belief) in supernatural powers, and practicality, which recurs throughout Mitchison's public life.

Mitchison's major heroines, Erif Der, Dione and Phoebe, and Kirstie, have two important features in common. First, each has at least some connection with magic: Erif Der has magical powers, and questions of supernatural belief are threaded through *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves*. Second, each is closely involved in, and affected by, sexual relationships and motherhood, and this can be linked to Mitchison's own life. The sensual description, clearly drawn from deep-rooted experience, of Erif Der's suckling her baby (*CKSQ*, p. 304), for instance, was written in a period during which several of Mitchison's children were born.

Mitchison herself sees a connection between her sexuality and her writing.

For most of my life my love relationships affected my writing. Presumably this is true for everyone in the arts; we swim much more in the emotions. ... I cannot but ask the young woman who was myself half a century ago if it was as important as all that, this state of being in love, this entanglement of bodies? ... But she would answer yes, it is utterly important, it is fuel for the imagination, it puts brilliance and vigour into one's vision. (*YMTA*, p. 70)

⁶⁶ Interview with Thompson, *Taliesin's Successors*.

⁶⁷ NM, 'To Deal with Witches', *Images of Africa* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1980), pp. 121-39.

It would appear from her work that the experiences of childbirth and of motherhood (actual or virtual, as in the motherly role she played in Carradale and Botswana) were equally closely entwined with creativity. It will be found in chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis that she was well aware of the concept of the Mother Goddess, which, among so much else, is presented in *The Golden Bough*:

[W]e may conclude that a great Mother Goddess, the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature, was worshipped under different names but with a substantial similarity of myth and ritual by many peoples of Western Asia ...⁶⁸

The creative role of the mother is seen by Mitchison to appertain not only to the actual child but to the brainchild, the idea. Sylvia Plath shares this perception, and her comparison of unsuccessful poems, metaphorically aborted, with literally aborted or stillborn babies is grimly cogent:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn't for lack of any mother-love. ...⁶⁹

Mitchison's presentation of the birth of a poem as the birth of a baby is jaunty in comparison, but no less personal:

When a thing comes to be written
It stops being true:
As it stands on the page no longer, no longer,
Oh no longer you!

So a new-born baby out of
Your body's very core:
Next he lies in his cot a stranger, a stranger,
Part of your life no more ...⁷⁰

Later chapters of this thesis will examine the influential theory of Margaret Murray, popularly accepted in the first half of the twentieth century

⁶⁸ Frazer, p. 314.

⁶⁹ Sylvia Plath, 'Stillborn', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 142.

⁷⁰ NM, 'Song', *Black Sparta* (Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 320. Hereafter *BS*.

and demonstrably known to Mitchison, which links witchcraft and magic with fertility. Another poem by Mitchison seems to underline the essential importance she attributes to fertility, both in her life and in her writing. This is 'The House of the Hare', which opens her 1978 collection *The Cleansing of the Knife*.

At the time I was four years old
I went to glean with the women,
Working the way they told;
My eyes were blue like blue-bells,
Lighter than oats my hair;
I came from the house of the Haldanes
Of work and thinking and prayer
To the God who is crowned with thorn,
The friend of the Boar and the Bear,
But oh when I went from there,
In the corn, in the corn, in the corn,
I was married young to a hare!

We went to kirk on the Sunday
And the Haldanes did not see
That a Haldane had been born
To run from the Boar and the Bear,
And the thing had happened to me
The day that I went with the gleaners,
The day that I built the corn-house,
That is not built with prayer.
For oh I was clean set free,
In the corn, in the corn, in the corn,
I had lived three days with the hare! (CK, p. 1)

This short poem, with its childlike, dancing rhythm, has the air of a simple nursery rhyme. Yet there is a purposeful, ritual beat to the dance: 'In the corn, in the corn, in the corn'. The juxtaposition of corn and God brings to mind the work of George Mackay Brown, who thought highly of *The Cleansing of the Knife*: he described it to a friend as 'passionate, earthy, beautifully wrought'.⁷¹ Similarities can be seen between his own poetry and that of Mitchison, both stylistically, in the deliberately plain language with saga and ballad overtones, and in the mythic dimension immanent in the work

⁷¹ Quoted in Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: the Life* (John Murray, 2006), p. 248.

of both writers. Specifically, an overlap between Christianity and paganism is constantly referenced in the work of Brown, a Catholic convert.⁷² Though Mitchison claimed no religious belief, this thesis will suggest that a similar intercommunication was evident to her.

The rhyme scheme of 'The House of the Hare', again, is not that of a child's jingle. It is free and unpredictable, except where a rhyme is repeated in order to emphasise key concepts: the Boar and the Bear, and their house of prayer, are juxtaposed and contrasted with the corn-house of the hare. As these discrepancies suggest, the poem on examination proves to be far from simple.

The experience it deals with is specifically dated to 'the time I was four years old', around the summer of 1902, when the young Naomi Haldane was on holiday at her grandmother's house of Cloan. The date of the poem's composition is unknown, though in *The Cleansing of the Knife* it is presented alongside three poems from the 1930s. Clearly it was not written when Mitchison was four years old, but at some later time, when the writer is viewing the event from a distance and with an adult consciousness.

In her memoirs, written still later, Mitchison comments 'I certainly did not know that the hare is the Celtic symbol of fertility and perhaps this has no connection at all with what I appeared to be doing in the harvest field' (*ST*, p. 33). If she did not know at the age of four, she did when she wrote her memoir some seventy years later, and it is perhaps not too rash to suggest that she knew by the time she was writing the poem.

She explains in her memoirs that she '... was sent out to glean for the old ladies in the Poor House' (*ST*, p. 33). While the poem's reference to gleaning – gathering corn left by the harvesters, often, as in this case, on behalf of the poor – is therefore based on fact, the statement which follows, 'I was married young to a hare!' is enigmatic and implausible, though

⁷² At a mass in Stromness in 1994 George Mackay Brown joined with some enthusiasm in singing the hymn 'Now the green blade riseth' (John M.C. Crum, 1928) which likens the resurrected Christ to 'the risen grain'. Its refrain, 'Love is come again/like wheat that springeth green', could hardly harmonise more closely with a recurrent theme in his work.

unambiguously presented. When Mitchison deals with the same episode in prose, a note of doubt creeps in.

In one of these cornfields I had very early on a curious adventure. Or had I? The reapers had scythed the oats, the binders following them. I was too small to bind but I was sent out to glean for the old ladies in the Poor House ... Then I met a brown hare and we went off and kept house (marriage, as I saw it) inside a corn stook with six oat sheaves propped round it ... as I remember it I was married young to the hare. (*ST*, p. 33)

In an interview a further twenty years later her position is quite definite: 'I remember [it] happening – though of course it didn't happen'.⁷³

We are not, therefore, to take the poem as a record of an actual occurrence. The young girl's espousal to the hare is to be understood on a symbolic level. Mitchison speaks briefly of the symbolism in the interview just quoted.

It is based on the idea that the boar and the bear were the male elements, the ones which were dominant. The hare escapes them, and so does the young girl, but it was also something that I felt very strongly
⁷⁴
...

On this reading, the poem is a feminist statement, which fits well with Mitchison's lifelong interest in women's rights. Its complex mythology seems, however, to contain more than that. The house of the Haldanes, rejected by the young girl, is identified not merely with male domination but with a particular rule of life: 'work and thinking and prayer/ To the God who is crowned with thorn'.

For this family of the minor gentry, *work* involved service to the community. When, as discussed in chapter 5, Mitchison became a laird in Carradale, she was at first unwilling because 'I felt I would get into Aunt Bay's position [at Cloan], pulled into everything' (*YMWA*, p. 218). She has described elsewhere the obligations binding even on a four-year-old child.

[I]n those days the old women from the poorhouse came and gleaned the oats ... My grandmother always sent me down from Cloan to glean

⁷³ Colin Nicholson, *Poem, Purpose and Place* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), p. 22.

⁷⁴ Nicholson, p. 22.

with them and to give them my gleanings ... [W]e used to drive down to the poorhouse at Auchterarder every week or so. My grandmother would read the Book to frail old ladies who were half blind ... I was bidden to sit beside them and then they stroked my hair, which I hated but felt I must bear.⁷⁵

In the poem, she escapes (actually or in her fantasy) from such duties to the untrammelled world of the corn-house and the hare: 'oh I was clean set free'.

Thinking, the life of the mind, was demonstrably important to the Haldane family. Mitchison's father and brother were scientists, and her three sons in turn followed academic careers. She herself pursued scientific interests, particularly in genetics and botany, as a child and adolescent. Yet, as noted earlier, she was apparently able from childhood onwards to accommodate both scientific thinking and intuitive feeling in her way of life. The hare is, among its other roles in mythology and tradition, a symbol of intuition; associated with the moon, it frequently figures as an emissary of the gods, bringing a message which (like an intuition) does not seem to have an earthly or explicable source.⁷⁶ The young girl's alliance with the hare may be seen as a turning away from the world of empirical thinking to the less strictly circumscribed world of intuition and creativity.

Grandmother, in Mitchison's reminiscences, reads to the old ladies from 'the Book' (the Bible): *prayer*, or religion, is implicit in the service being rendered. In the poem, the young girl escapes specifically from 'the God who is crowned with thorn', the Christian God. Later, when she goes with her family 'to kirk on the Sunday', she is aware, though they are not, that she has rejected the God of the Haldanes and chosen to live in 'the corn-house/ That is not built with prayer'.

In doing so she has chosen a pre-Christian form of belief. Mitchison had early encountered some manifestations of this – not by the age of four, but, as noted earlier in this chapter, only a few years later – in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Frazer describes a widespread custom of postulating a corn-spirit – since corn, like the sacrificial king, dies and lives again – and

⁷⁵ NM, 'The Old Gleaners', *Glasgow Herald*, 25 September 1954, p. 3.

embodying it in the form of a person or animal. The last sheaf at harvest may be named after this personification and its reaping marked by ceremony. A common embodiment is the hare⁷⁷, though there may also be a practical explanation of its position as a corn-spirit:

Where the reaper-and-binder is still used, the corn is cut in ever narrowing circles as the machine works round and round the field, and the frightened hares or rabbits are driven to the centre. The harvesters, armed with sticks or guns, gather round and kill them as they rush out from the very last piece to be cut. Of course they are not 'killing the corn-spirit'. They do it for sport and to take home something to eat. But it is [an] example of how images may be derived from what one sees around one. The hare in the last sheaf was not always visible.⁷⁸

As corn-spirit, it is linked with the myth of the Corn King, addressed by Mitchison in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, and thus with fertility and rebirth; but its significance is not confined to the harvest field. The hare is an attribute of the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre, from whom comes the name of the Christian festival of Easter, synonymous with resurrection and rebirth. (Eostre's hare nowadays takes the banal form of the Easter Bunny.) Eostre is the daughter of Jörd, the earth; the pairing is cognate with that of Persephone and Demeter, the Earth Mother.⁷⁹ In the symbol of the hare chosen as spouse by the young girl is the whole concept of a mother goddess, a life-giving female power.

Implicit in this concept too is the idea of fertility. A fairy hare appears in Mitchison's poem 'Clemency Ealasaid' (BC, pp. 11-15), which was occasioned by the death of her youngest daughter at birth. Line 68 of the poem draws on the deposit of myth, legend and superstition which she had found in the Carradale area. She is lamenting that she had no foreknowledge – no intuition – of the coming tragedy: 'Weeper of Carradale Glen, fairy hare, cleft rock, did none of you speak?' All these supernatural manifestations pertain to Carradale (though all have their counterparts in other areas of

⁷⁶ John Layard, *The Lady of the Hare* (Faber and Faber, 1944). See pp. 225-6 and passim.

⁷⁷ Frazer, pp. 461-2.

⁷⁸ George Ewart Evans and David Thomson, *The Leaping Hare* (Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 137.

⁷⁹ Evans and Thomson, pp. 132-3.

Scotland and in international folklore).⁸⁰ They share a further likeness, however, in that all are connected with family, motherhood or fertility, and it seems probable that Mitchison has selected them with that quality in mind.

The Weeper is a *caointeach* (or *caoineag*: varying spellings of both forms are found), a type of supernatural being which is heard mourning before a death, the West Highland equivalent of the Irish banshee.⁸¹ George Campbell Hay, brought up in Tarbert Loch Fyne, uses the same legend in his poem about three brothers lost at sea.

Afore the brekk o day in the moarnin,
when it wasna derk an it wasna dawnin,
from the rocks on the *rubh*’ they heard a cryin,
a *ceinteach*’s keenin. They kent their story.⁸²

Though, like the banshee (*bean sidhe*, fairy woman), the *caointeach* is most often conceived to be a weeping woman, in Carradale it is a crying child, a form also found in Ireland.

When young this woman had gone with other girls into the wood to gather nuts; and ... they heard sore weeping, like the sobbing of a very little child. ... The sound of the sobbings kept going before them, and keeping the same distance from them wherever they went. ... Then the oldest of the girls said ‘It is the *Caointeach*!’ and when they knew that it was the Mourner they became alarmed and went home. In a few days after they were told that the Lady of Carradale was dead.⁸³

The *caointeach*, like the banshee, is generally associated with a particular family. The Carradale Weeper, as Mitchison had no doubt learned, is in fact associated with the owners of Carradale House. Because Clemency Ealasaid was a new member of the Weeper’s family, Mitchison chooses it to appeal to in her grief.

⁸⁰ See Francis Thompson, *The Supernatural Highlands* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 1997) and Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish fairy belief: a history* (Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 2001) for further details on all the beliefs mentioned here, with extensive bibliographies.

⁸¹ See Thompson, *The Supernatural Highlands*, p. 106; also Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: the Irish death messenger*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1996).

⁸² George Campbell Hay, ‘Three Brothers’, *Collected Poems and Songs*, ed. by Michel Byrne (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 13-14 (13). [Originally published 2000]

⁸³ Cuthbert Bede, *Argyll’s Highlands and the Lords of Lorne* (Glasgow: John Mackay, 1902), p. 48.

In Kintyre folklore, and Scottish folklore in general, hares are strongly connected with the supernatural, often as witch hares, one of the animals into which witches were accustomed to transform themselves.⁸⁴ The hare's role as a fertility symbol and Mitchison's interest in the witchcraft/fertility nexus have already been mentioned. In appealing to a fairy hare she is consciously selecting a supernatural being strongly connected with fertility beliefs.

Equally significant is her citing of the 'cleft rock', which may be found at Brackley, north of Carradale, adjacent to a chambered cairn.

For centuries this site has been attributed with [sic] protective and curative powers, and even today votive offerings of iron nails and pins can be seen hammered deep into the conspicuous rift running down one side of the great upright slab known locally as the Toothie Stane.⁸⁵

But the name as given here may be comparatively modern, or even a euphemism. As Mitchison is likely to have known, cleft rocks are much more often related to fertility beliefs and rituals. Rock formations of this kind are seen as symbolising the yoni, the Sanskrit word for the genital triangle of the Mother Goddess, found in art from the Paleolithic period onwards.⁸⁶

'Clemency Ealasaid' thus takes its place alongside other work in which Mitchison appears to attach importance to the principle of fertility, whether in personal celebration, as in her poem 'The Midsummer Apple Tree', or in the context of ritual, as in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. In this light, if we look again at 'The House of the Hare', we may find that she is seeing herself as dedicated, from childhood on, to the qualities of female power, fertility and intuition symbolised by the hare. It is a striking example of the close connection which, as this thesis will argue, Mitchison felt to exist between myth and life.

⁸⁴ For a witch hare story recorded in Kintyre in the 1970s, see *Kintyre Magazine* 41 (1997), 28.

⁸⁵ *Exploring Historic Kintyre* (West Highlands and Islands of Argyll Tourist Board, 1992), p. 23.

⁸⁶ Shahrukh Husain, *The Goddess: Power, Sexuality and the Feminine Divine* (Duncan Baird, 2000), pp. 96-7.

CHAPTER 3

Witches and women (1): *We Have Been Warned*.

We who have borne and suckled beautiful children,
We who have lived with our bodies,
We, working with the Labour party, we the democrats,
We will begin to speak.¹

We Have Been Warned, the first novel for which Naomi Mitchison chooses a contemporary setting rather than a classical or mythical background, is set in Britain and Russia between September 1931 and March 1933. It deals with socialism in Britain and in the Soviet Union; the threat of totalitarianism; social structure in the British class system and the Scottish clan system; and female sexuality. Neglected for years, it has now begun to be re-evaluated in the contexts of political fiction, dystopian fiction, and women's writing of the 1930s, but its mythic and symbolic elements, which, it will be argued in this chapter, are integral to the novel, have been less closely examined.²

The novel under consideration differs in some respects from the novel which Mitchison wrote. *We Have Been Warned* had a lengthy passage from writing to publication, unusual in Mitchison's experience at that time, since her historical novels were not only popular but critically acclaimed and were finding a ready market. The foreword specifies that 'the final chapters of the book were written before the events of summer 1933 in Germany, and before the counter-revolutions of 1934 in Austria and Spain' (*WHBW*, p. v), and

¹ From NM, 'New Verse 1937', *Chapman* 50-51 (1987), 20.

² See for instance Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II* (Macmillan, 1998), pp. 72-85; Elizabeth Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 1999), pp.138-50; and Benton, pp. 104-6.

chapters appeared in periodicals during 1933 and 1934³. The book as a whole, however, was not published until 1935.

In her memoir *You May Well Ask* (pp. 171-80) Mitchison documents the publishing delay and its causes with indignation undimmed by the lapse of over forty years. The novel in its original form contained episodes and phrases which publishers at the time considered too plain-spoken on sexual matters. Mitchison made some cuts, but could not agree to the extensive deletions and alterations required by her publisher Jonathan Cape, and removed the manuscript from them. It was rejected in turn by Victor Gollancz and John Lane. Constable eventually agreed to publish it, though, to Mitchison's anger, they tried to make alterations at page proof stage. In a 1987 interview she still views the cuts as misconceived, though recognising that part of the trouble lay in the contemporary moral climate.

I've still got the original bits that were cut out and they *were* important. But then, you see, when I next started writing novels it was after the war, and *then* I could have gone all out and what I'd had in *We Have Been Warned* would have been nothing. People had suddenly got used to much more in the way of description of sex in all its many forms. And there would have been no problem about anything I wrote.⁴

The published result, therefore, is a novel which, if eventually acceptable to Constable, was not entirely so to Mitchison.

It was unfavourably received by reviewers. The liberal and feminist *Time and Tide*, to which Mitchison was at the time a regular contributor, considered that 'it commands attention and a good deal of applause,' but also that 'many a good Socialist will be profoundly shocked by Dione Galton's sexual unreticence ...' The notably left-wing *New Statesman* called it 'an admirable analysis of contemporary England from the point of view of revolutionary socialism'.⁵ *The Glasgow Herald*, however, was not impressed.

This attempt at a political novel cannot be written down as other than a gallant but dismal failure ... Mrs Mitchison never comes close to the

³ *Modern Scot*, 4 (1933), 100-4; *New Oxford Outlook* (February 1934), 274-87.

⁴ 'Naomi Mitchison talking with Alison Hennegan', p. 173.

⁵ See jacket of *FP* for these and other review quotes. The unfavourable *Time and Tide* comment is quoted by Lassner, p. 84.

heart of the people. She writes all the time from the point of view of the outsider, of the clinic.⁶

The novel was savagely reviewed by Q.D. Leavis,⁷ who attacks Mitchison for attempting to speak for the workers from her 'innocently bourgeois background' (p. 112), and goes farther:

[A]part from, or in spite of, its political views and general intellectual pretensions, *We Have Been Warned* is just another bestseller. ... The style ... [apart from imitations deplored by Leavis] is just that of the average magazine story. ... The general competence of the writer is thus dubious. (p. 114)

Nevertheless *We Have Been Warned* marks a development in Mitchison's writing, since it is her first novel in Modernist style. The second chapter, 'Auchanarnish 2' (pp. 18-41), for instance, includes an extended stream-of-consciousness sequence reflecting many of the themes of the novel through the thoughts of a group of dancers.

Mitchison was well aware of the Modernist movement. We have seen in chapter 2 that her poem 'The Historian and the Individuals' refers to Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, Joyce's *Ulysses*⁸ and MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Her memoirs document her early enthusiasm for Auden (*YMWA*, pp. 117-26). For a novel dealing with the problems of modern society, culminating in the depiction of successively bleaker dystopias, a Modernist style was clearly appropriate.

[E]xperimentalism does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration. ... [M]yth, structure and organization in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for formal reasons. ... If it is an art of metamorphosis ... it is also a sense of disorientation and nightmare.⁹

⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 25 April 1935, p. 4.

⁷ Q.D. Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', *Scrutiny*, 4 (1935), 112-32.

⁸ The poem appears in the 1933 collection *The Delicate Fire* but *Ulysses* was not published in Britain until 1936; NM must have been interested enough to obtain a copy published abroad.

⁹ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 19-55 (26). [Originally published 1976]

The slightly later novella *Beyond This Limit* (1935), written in collaboration with the artist Wyndham Lewis (see *YMWA*, pp. 148-9), is totally Modernist, free, surreal and accomplished in a style to which Mitchison did not later return.

Critics both in 1935 and today, however, have felt that *We Have Been Warned* does not entirely succeed as a novel. Though its abrupt juxtapositions of realism and symbolism may be intended to mirror the harshness of the contemporary world, the result is sometimes awkward and disjointed. The many plot strands and sub-plots in the novel include the family life and political activism of the central character Dione; a rape incident; a political assassination; a by-election campaign; and a fact-finding trip to Russia. There is also the situation of Dione's sister Phoebe, deeply unhappy because of the recent end of a love affair, which is foregrounded at some points but does not contribute to the overall plan of the novel. At the time of publication the poet Michael Roberts wrote perceptively to Mitchison: 'It's like a first novel, you've used far more material than you can master' (*YMWA*, p. 178). A recent critic concurs: '[Mitchison] introduces too many fringe issues and sticks them centre stage.'¹⁰

Mitchison herself in later years was inclined to agree:

It's got such a lot of *thick* bits, which seem to me like unstirred soup ... And it's overwritten. But I think there are some good bits in it.¹¹

The 'thick bits', perhaps to be recognised in the almost self-contained sections devoted to the election campaign (*WHBW*, pp. 49-95) and the Russian journey (pp. 217-332), are necessary to Mitchison's dystopian vision, but these episodes, at 45 and 115 pages respectively, tend to overbalance the structure of the novel. Also, with their passages of near-reportage, they read to some extent like transcriptions from a diary which have not found satisfactory fictional form.¹² In fact Dione's experiences closely parallel Mitchison's own, recorded in *You May Well Ask* (see pp. 184-91). It may be

¹⁰ Maslen, p. 145.

¹¹ 'Naomi Mitchison talking with Alison Hennegan', p. 173.

that the novel was written too soon after the real-life events, so that the distancing necessary for the transmutation of fact to fiction has not yet taken place.

The *Times Literary Supplement* had problems with *We Have Been Warned* on different grounds from those cited in other reviews.

The difficulty in saying anything at all, at any rate by way of criticism, of Mrs Naomi Mitchison's latest novel ... arises from a feeling of embarrassment that is as continuous as it is unexpected. ... The embarrassment that awaits the reader is not, it need hardly be said, a matter of the choice of subject, but of the peculiar brand of sentiment, astonishingly insistent and unrestrained, that informs every page.¹³

The 'sentiment' which the reviewer finds so disconcerting is probably the close examination, almost solipsistic in its intensity, of Dione's emotional life. It is indeed a departure from the clear-eyed, matter-of-fact treatment of sex and emotion in Mitchison's earlier fiction, but this in itself should lead us to look attentively at the character and at Mitchison's attitude to her.

As suggested in chapter 2, there is a considerable infusion of autobiographical material in Dione. This extends beyond her political sympathies to the question of open marriage, discussed by Dione and her husband in the novel (*WHBW*, pp. 297, 308-9) and by Mitchison in her memoirs (*YMWA*, pp. 70-3). Dione's emotions, as the *TLS* reviewer complains, are scrutinised with an almost obsessive intensity, though that would not necessarily amount to an artistic flaw if the character were fully realised in fictional terms.

Dione's sister Phoebe (whose situation in *We Have Been Warned* - her lover has suddenly married someone else - was also experienced by Mitchison¹⁴), is the central character in the novella *Beyond This Limit*, and in describing her collaboration with Wyndham Lewis Mitchison refers simply to 'Phoebe, who is me' (*YMWA*, p. 148). She expands on this in an interview: '[Lewis] was acting as the guide of souls and with this great black hat he

¹² See NM, 'Pages from a Russian Diary', *Modern Scot*, 3 (1932), 229-36. A typescript diary of the Russian trip is in NLS Acc 10899.

¹³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 April 1935, 270.

¹⁴ See Calder, *Nine Lives*, pp. 79-86.

always wore, and I was wearing this headscarf which I always wore ...'¹⁵ Both the black hat and the headscarf feature in the illustrations to *Beyond This Limit*, identifying Phoebe as Mitchison beyond doubt. Thus it is probably correct to infer that Dione and Phoebe are both based on Mitchison herself; we may further theorise that Dione represents her practical and political side and Phoebe her creative side. The awkwardness in presentation apprehended by the reviewer, as perhaps by the reader, may arise, like the awkwardness of the election and Russian episodes, from a closeness to fact which in this case inhibits Mitchison's development of her fictional characters.

Yet in another view Mitchison can be seen as detached from Dione, writing 'in a self-consciously double voice'¹⁶, to quote a critic who takes issue with the strictures of Leavis: 'Biased by her own identity politics, Leavis cannot see Mitchison's critical irony'.¹⁷ In this reading Mitchison, in critiquing the fact that Dione espouses socialist mores from the safety of a privileged lifestyle, is being self-critical throughout. As she thus examines one of the major contradictions in her own life, the situation of a socialist laird, perhaps she is also seeing and depicting a more internalised contradiction: the co-existence of emotionalism and practicality evident in her autobiographical writing. 'I never went into tears twice on the same floor of the Scottish Office. That would have been counter-productive.' (SSP, p. 10)

From the viewpoint of this thesis, *We Have Been Warned* is important for two reasons in particular. It is the first novel in which Mitchison makes use of a Scottish setting and considers Scottish themes; and it is her first attempt in a novel to integrate the supernatural or irrational into everyday contemporary life.

Mitchison herself recognised that setting a novel in Scotland represented a change of direction for her, indicating in an autobiographical essay that *We Have Been Warned* marks the beginning of a much closer involvement with Scotland.

¹⁵ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, pp. 93-4.

¹⁶ Lassner, p. 74.

¹⁷ Lassner, p. 76.

In my mind the tug of Hellas and the ancient Mediterranean world was lessening. I was ready for something different; this is apparent in my book *We Have Been Warned*. ... The approach to Scotland was our holiday lease of Craignish Castle in 1934 and the dance we held there. (SSP, p. 1)

The date 1934 should be regarded with some caution (like other dates in Mitchison's autobiographical recollections, written long after the events they describe). *We Have Been Warned*, as we have seen, was substantially complete by 1934, and Mitchison's biographer places her Craignish holidays in 1930 and 1931.¹⁸ (In *You May Well Ask* (1979) Mitchison describes Craignish Castle as 'now demolished' (p. 214), but its description in the authoritative RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll is dated 1984,¹⁹ and indeed it has survived into the twenty-first century.)

The same Inventory names a farm on the Craignish estate as 'Achanarnich' and an identification of Auchanarnish in *We Have Been Warned*, 'only about fifty miles away from Inverary [sic]' (p. 3), with Craignish in Argyll seems justified. The Inventory's plan of the house even reveals a deep window embrasure in the original western wall, where Dione finds the ghost Green Jean sitting with her back to the late sunlight (pp. 528-9).

The descriptions of lochs and islands in *We Have Been Warned* are not only evocative of the Western Highlands but often topographically exact:

The currents and the tides enclose and net the islands, swinging and hurrying for ever under the Paps of Jura, under the steeps of Islay, twisting out beyond Colonsay and Oronsay and the Outer Islands, forced in saw-toothed fierce tide-ripples through the Sounds and south along Kintyre ... (p. 14)

It would appear that Mitchison became acquainted during her Craignish holidays with not only the geography but the ethos of the West Highlands, including its folklore legends and beliefs, since a poem sequence set in Craignish, 'Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man', introduces the theme of the

¹⁸ Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 103.

¹⁹ Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll: an Inventory of the Monuments*, VII (HMSO, 1992), pp. 259-62.

fairy hill, later to become a recurrent one in her work. Her familiarity with the concept of the Mother Goddess or Earth Mother has been noted in chapter 2, and 'Mairi MacLean' indicates that she has discovered a local application of the belief:

All night the Paps of Jura are standing against the stars.
Oh paps of the Jura Woman that dreams of her lover's breast! ...²⁰

Mitchison refers to Craignish and 'the dance we held there' in an undated letter to the novelist Stella Benson, written no later than 1933, the year of Benson's death.

We are up here in this incredibly beautiful place thirty miles from a station ... all very Celtic, islands and sunsets and sea lochs of blue paint ... We are having a dance next week ... The gardener who is running it has produced one of the best pipers on the west coast, also a fiddle and melodeon and we shall have to dance all the proper things – quadrilles, reels, Flowers of Edinburgh, Strip the Willow, Petronella and so on.

After quoting this letter in *You May Well Ask* (pp. 136-7), Mitchison adds 'This was the dance that comes into my book *We Have Been Warned*.' It is the core of the chapter 'Auchanarnish 2' (pp. 18-41), and presents 'MacLean, the gardener, Master of Ceremonies' (p. 23); the piper with 'curly iron-grey hair and wandering blue eyes', surely a portrait from life (p. 22); the fiddler and the melodeon player (p. 23), and the programme of dances, all as described in the letter to Benson. In this case Mitchison does carry through a successful transfer from fact to fiction. The episode is treated in stream-of-consciousness style, and, in further evidence of Mitchison's conversion to Modernism, it is packed with the symbols which she uses throughout the novel.

Most of these have already been introduced in the opening chapter, an early indication of their importance in the plan of the book. When, in accordance with the focus of this thesis, we consider Mitchison's use of the supernatural in *We Have Been Warned*, we find it inseparable from her use of symbolism. Critics have been uncertain how to receive this, though

²⁰ NM, 'Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man', *FP*, pp. 219-22 (221).

supernatural entities irrupt into the lives of Dione and Phoebe as perceptibly and insistently as Mitchison's 'simulacra' invaded her own consciousness in childhood. The *TLS* reviewer, for instance, never mentions this element, while *The Glasgow Herald* ignores it in a more pointed fashion, explaining that 'through the agency of an old Highland woman [Dione] foresees both the revolution and the counter-revolution ...'²¹ The reviewer does not mention – though surely he cannot have failed to notice – that the Highland woman, Green Jean, is a ghost.

One critic has no doubt that the introduction of Green Jean and the other supernatural 'characters' is a grave mistake.

The characters of Jean's story degenerate into whimsy as they keep invading the realist world of the rest of the novel, always at critical moments...Unfortunately Dione's world, the early Thirties' world, cannot accommodate the slippage between actuality and intrusions from imaginary, fabular layers of consciousness which worked so well in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* ... Mitchison seems to have lost her sense of artistic decorum which limits what modes of expression can sit comfortably with each other.²²

Yet this is an important part of the book, and Mitchison seems to have recognised it as such. The question of the magic in *We Have Been Warned* is aired in an interview of 1984. The interviewer asks whether, in Mitchison's opinion, the 'magic side' of Dione and Phoebe, 'the Campbell women – the Kelpies', entirely works. Mitchison temporises slightly: 'It would be very difficult to take it out', and the impression is certainly given that the magic is integral to the novel.²³

Nor is there anything unusual in the use of symbolism in a Modernist novel.²⁴ Mitchison's originality lies perhaps in her mixing of ancient and modern symbols, which she does with a definite purpose in mind. The nine symbols which recur in *We Have Been Warned* are, in order of appearance, Green Jean; the Campbell Women; kelpies; the Talking Crow; St Finnigal;

²¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 25 April 1935, p. 4.

²² Maslen, p. 143.

²³ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p. 86.

²⁴ See for instance Melvin J. Friedman, 'The Symbolist Novel: Huysmans to Malraux', in Bradbury and McFarlane, pp. 453-66.

seals; the gules lion; tractors; and an Elephant (the capital E is invariable). They are not all the same type of symbol. The gules lion rampant of Scotland, for instance, is a familiar heraldic device, but the tractors are clearly of the modern world and are (or were in the 1930s) evocative of the collective strength of the Soviet worker. Kelpies and seals, used here as symbols, are common elements of Scottish folklore.

Mitchison, aware of the power of myth, wants to indicate that this power is still present, even in the outwardly rational and realistic contemporary world. In later chapters of this thesis, such a view will be found to be pervasive throughout her writing, most notably perhaps in her short stories (see chapter 7). A modern world, however, requires modern symbols, as she makes clear in a note to her 1947 novel *The Bull Calves*.

[W]e cannot just clean up and re-use symbols or myths which are still in general use but have lost their potency and interest, though this is a mistake which is often made. We have to have mythologies which will be potent and protecting for our own era. ... I have tried to use a new set of symbols in fiction in *We Have Been Warned*. But I have thought of the symbols, not merely as protection for the individual, but also as social glue, doubtless another aspect of the same thing. (BC, pp. 515-6)

Her stress on the idea of protection for the individual and for society is repeated in a two-part article from the same period, in which she suggests that some sort of meaningful mythical structure is necessary for the psychic health of a country or society, and that western Europe in the mid-twentieth century suffered 'an emptying of the unconscious' which was filled by dangerous nationalistic stereotypes.²⁵

Her belief that this support is necessary in both public and private life is illustrated in *We Have Been Warned* by the fact that some of the symbols are primarily relevant to the political message of the novel, while others are of personal relevance to Dione and Phoebe. Important on both levels are the striking figures of Green Jean and the Campbell Women, employed by Mitchison to explore what may be recognised as the central theme of this

²⁵ NM, 'The Empty Places', *Scotland*, 20 (1948), 8-11; 'The Scots Hero', *Scotland*, 21 (1948), 40-4.

multi-layered novel: the position (domestic, political and ideological) of women past and present. Yet often symbols of different kinds work together, indicative of a meshing of personal and political issues (as often in Mitchison's life). All nine appear in the powerful episode of Phoebe's waking nightmare (pp. 163-9), which will be examined later in this chapter.

1. The tractors

The tractors appear early in the novel (p. 32) and are particular to Dione. Though she shares certain 'images of their common childhood' with Phoebe,

she had an image of her own ... an image of plow-tractors. Whenever she was dispirited and disappointed, impatient with her friends or angry and violent against the world of happenings, she called up the calming image of the tractors, moving slowly and securely across a hillside, either under March sun and blowing wind, or through a pale April mist. She had told her sister about the tractors, hoping that Phoebe would make a picture of them, but Phoebe had rather crossly said that she wouldn't waste her time on slushy propaganda posters, so the picture never got made. (p. 32)

Phoebe's view is justifiable. It may be suggested without too much danger of contradiction that Dione, daughter of the Scottish landed gentry and wife of an Oxford don, had never driven a tractor.²⁶ The tractors in *We Have Been Warned* are largely 'propaganda posters'. By way of the earthy, practical peasant life, they signify comradeship and socialism. This is explicitly stated a few pages later, when Dione is delighted to see a newspaper billboard in Oban reading 'England Off the Gold Standard'. Highly elated, she drives home to Auchanarnish:

She speeded happily ... Her tractors were in gear, they were moving fast across the waste, the thorny land of England and Scotland, the land which had once been under wheat, but had been enclosed, made into parks and deer forests. The beautiful tractors of the revolution! (pp. 47-8)

²⁶ Neither had Mitchison at the time of writing *WHBW*, though she learned later: see *AYTN*, p. 136-7.

The use of the hackneyed if exultant slogan, no less than the wasteland reference, reinforces the view that Mitchison's depiction of Dione is not a straightforward one. If Dione and Phoebe constitute to some extent a double character, Phoebe naturally at times supplies one part of the 'double voice' noted earlier. To the Labour activist Dione, these are tractors of power. To the aesthetic Phoebe, they are rather crudely rendered poster art. While at a first reading Dione's view appears to prevail, closer consideration reveals a more ambiguous statement, the 'scathing portrait of a self-deceived British socialism'²⁷ detected by the critic cited earlier..

It may be questioned whether something as mundane and mechanical as a tractor works as a symbol among figures from folklore (though, as in the case of other elements in the novel, the awkwardness may be intentional), or whether it evokes unintended images. Depending perhaps on the reader's own background, tractors may equate with power, with socialism, or with noise and the smell of diesel fuel. Such is the danger of introducing 'a new set of symbols', leading to the objection quoted above, that what works in mythical Marob does not work in 1930s Britain. Yet Mitchison has introduced these unconventional symbols deliberately, in order to replace others which have 'lost their potency and interest'. In considering the episode of Phoebe's nightmare we shall find that behind the tractors, jarring as they may at first appear, is a vision which chimes with the concerns of Mitchison's earlier novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. The tractor of the Soviet propaganda posters is significant not only because it symbolises collective farming and is more powerful than a single horse (or peasant), but because it transforms unproductive land into fields of wheat. The wasteland blooms.

2. The Elephant

The Elephant, introduced on page 121 of *We Have Been Warned*, has its source in a Goya etching which evidently made a considerable impression

²⁷ Lassner, p. 74.



Otras Layas Por El Pueblo (Other Laws for the People)
From the *Disparates (Follies)* series, 1815-23

Francisco de Goya (1746-1828)

on Mitchison.²⁸ It has a dual role. Firstly, it is a Labour Party Elephant, as Phoebe explains.

‘Those little men in the corner had some good ideas and they’re showing them to the Elephant. ... [They] are telling the Elephant to read Marx and Lenin, not to speak of G.D.H. Cole, T.E. Galton [Dione’s husband], H.N. Brailsford, and the *New Statesman*. And he’s reading them, but it hasn’t changed his elephantishness, and if he decides they aren’t quite nice, he’ll reach out his trunk, and that’ll be the end of you. Oh yes, the elephant joined the Labour Party when it got respectable and took over from the non-conformists.’ (pp. 121-2)

But ‘respectable’ is a key word.

‘He’s a very respectable Elephant ... He wants you to have a trunk the same as he has, and little bright, prying eyes and a thick skin and rather a limited brain space. Oh yes, and a backbone. The backbone of England. ... [T]he Oxford Elephant’s a real fruity one. ... That Elephant’s humped himself between me and Phil [Phoebe’s lover], so that we can’t even see one another, and if I try to dodge round him, his nasty little eyes’ll turn red, his ears’ll begin to flap, and his trunk’ll reach out for me.’ (pp. 121-2)

Thus, secondly, the Elephant symbolises respectability and convention, and their crushing effect on all that is beautiful and free. It is evoked again – ‘An Elephant had been killed’ (p. 287) – when Dione’s protégé Donald, to be discussed below, overcomes his repression and first sleeps with a woman. It is aligned with the Campbell Women (p. 430), who, throughout the novel, harass the unconventional Dione and Phoebe. Dione identifies it at first as a kelpie, which, as we shall see, is her (and Mitchison’s) standard symbol of evil, and Phoebe says explicitly ‘He can be a very nasty Elephant’ (p. 121). Convention had been a bugbear of Mitchison’s since her girlhood – ‘The essential was to wear the right clothes for one’s station in life’ (*ACH*, p. 32) – and the difficulties faced by the unconventional woman will prove to be a major theme of *We Have Been Warned*.

The Elephant, an awkward symbol in a scheme of things which includes kelpies and witches, appears at a garden party with even more

²⁸ Titled *Otras Leyas Por El Pueblo* (Other Laws for the People), it is one of a series of prints known as the *Disparates* (Follies) (1815-1823). See www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk/Archives/goja3/disp.html

disconcerting effect, since here it turns out to be a real elephant escaped from a zoo (pp. 205-6). Mitchison's first biographer has found a rationale for this episode, which on first reading seems bizarre to the point of being an error of judgment:

In the margins of her published copy of *We Have Been Warned* ..., Naomi has pencilled, 'this elephant part is in a way the genesis of the book – Wystan [W.H. Auden] telling me to write a book about an elephant at a garden party'.²⁹

Perhaps this fragment of real life, like the election and Russian episodes, does not entirely mesh with the fictional world of Dione and Phoebe, but again this awkwardness itself may be Mitchison's intention. The Labour Party elephant, like the proverbial bull in a china shop, does not suit Dione's middle-class Oxford milieu. Yet Mitchison suggests that the 'very nasty Elephant' is not after all to be feared, for Dione's small daughter tames it with a sugary cake. 'Perhaps if we were all as sensible as Morag he'd come and eat out of our hands too.' (p. 206)

3. The gules lion

Meanwhile Phoebe (and to a lesser extent Dione) is being haunted by the gules lion, the red Lion Rampant from the royal standard of Scotland, which, if only it would wake, would make short work of the Elephant.

The gules lion shook himself, only half asleep. If ever the lion wakes entirely he will not be afraid of anything; the lion will laugh a fanged and flame-tongued lion laugh about the Elephant and wither him up. But the lion is not yet awake and the Elephant has it all his own way. (p. 123)

The gules lion symbolises Scotland. Both Dione and Phoebe express Scottish nationalist sentiments in the course of the novel. They are Frasers by birth, and though (like Mitchison at this time) living in England, they retain a sense of Scottish identity. The gules lion is asleep for most of the book. If it could be awakened, Phoebe envisions in a daydream (pp. 9-17), Scotland would be a happy, prosperous place. Filling flower-vases with water, she

imagines the Auchanarnish water flowing into the loch, into the western sea, and then into the Gare Loch, full of 'lowland ships ... wedged into the highlands'. But 'because of the slump [the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s] ... Scotland is not functioning'. Phoebe dreams of being able to 'wake up the gules lion ... to say Scotland in such a loud and surprising voice that walls would tumble down ... so startlingly that the clans would gather at Gare Loch head ...'

She calls on the lion to awake during the dancing of Scottish reels (pp. 27, 31). On two occasions during the novel it does awake briefly: both involve Dione's clansman Donald MacLean. Importantly in the scheme of the novel, and in their own minds, Dione and Phoebe are not only Frasers but, on their mother's side, MacLeans. (Their maternal ancestors include the witch/ghost Green Jean.)

Donald MacLean, a young working-class man and 'a sort of a dim cousin' of Dione's (p. 208), is smuggled to Russia by Dione after he has killed a right-wing newspaper proprietor. This unexpected and not totally convincing plot strand may be another example of Mitchison's deliberate subversion of our expectation. One critic, however, finds Dione's motivation confusing and a flaw in the novel.

Tribalism wins over democracy, and while this may reflect the way many react in an emergency, the incident cannot but jar in a novel supposedly showing the importance of democratic socialism.³⁰

Dione attempts to explain the significance of her heritage to a puzzled English friend.

'My mother was an heiress, so father came and lived on her land. She was a MacLean – like Donald – and Auchanarnish is a MacLean castle ... It explains Donald – and me. And it explains me-and-Donald, if you see what I mean.' (p. 521)

Dione's sympathy for Donald on the grounds of clan loyalty as much as political conviction may be symptomatic of Mitchison's new involvement

²⁹ Benton, p. 90.

³⁰ Maslen, p. 145.

with Scotland. It is true that until this late point in the novel socialism has indeed been a more prominent feature in Dione's life than nationalism. She goes on from her explanation about Donald:

'It's on the cards that there might be a green revolution up here, Agnes. If we could only give this wretched lion a good dig in the ribs! ... But it's all right, Agnes; I'm not really a Nationalist. At least – I'm a Socialist first.' (pp. 521-2)

Chronologically, Mitchison herself had been 'a Socialist first', and she maintained her interest and involvement in international socialism throughout her life. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, she is to be found writing in the Glasgow socialist weekly *Forward* in support of the then recently resurgent idea of Scottish home rule, envisaging herself as a member of a Scottish government in Edinburgh (education was her preferred portfolio).³¹

If Dione's helping Donald is motivated by 'tribalism', this is equated with nationalism and set alongside socialist comradeship. As she hurries him into hiding after the assassination, 'the rough back of the gules lion, awake for a moment, arched itself under her hand.' (p. 199) When he finds a new life in Russia, 'he gave a queer sudden bound and a kind of war shout. The gules lion awoke.' (p. 282)

But the lion and its meaning tend to become obscured among the novel's proliferation of events and symbols: Scottish nationalism does not come across as a principal theme. It appears to be presented as less important to Scotland than the international socialism so enthusiastically espoused by Dione. Perhaps we see Mitchison, as Dione, at an early stage of considering the two options.

4. Saint Finnigal

Saint Finnigal too seems at first sight to be rather sketchily treated, but in the symbolic scheme of the book it is her function to be ineffective. She

³¹ See for instance NM: 'No Complacency, Obstinacy – but Work for Each Other' ('The Scotland I want to see', no 4), *Forward*, 42 (9 October 1948), 4.

represents 'that part of the spirit of Scotland which has come to an end as a living thing' (p. 32), and consequently appears as a two-dimensional figure without much relevance to the present day.

Saint Finnigal wears a white dress all over Celtic patterns like the fireplace in the smoking-room, and she has long, tidy hair, and she is all part of Highland folklore in grey cloth with gilt lettering out of the best book-case, so she is not quite alive or quite solid. (p. 13)

The entry for Craignish Castle in the RCAHMS Inventory remarks on an 'early 20th-century scheme of decoration' with 'reliefs of West Highland foliated and interlaced motifs' especially notable on a chimneypiece and overmantel.³²

Saint Finnigal represents the Celtic culture of Scotland; to be exact, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival of that culture sometimes called, as in Ireland, the Celtic Twilight, and espoused with enthusiasm by, for instance, 'Fiona Macleod', the pseudonym and alter ego of William Sharp (1855-1905). Mitchison depicts Saint Finnigal as irrelevant to the reality of Highland, or Scottish, life and culture. A contemporary opinion on similar lines is expressed by the Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean:

[The] Celtic Twilight never bore any earthly relation to anything in Gaelic life or literature. It was merely one of the latest births of the English literary bourgeoisie, and its births are to Gaelic eyes exceedingly strange ... I suppose no Celtic Twilightist ever read 'Moladh Móraig' ['In Praise of Morag', by the eighteenth-century poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair]. ... Imagine Móraig swathed in a tenuous halo of the Twilight: Móraig is a creature of the real world that is full of self-confidence, a real world that jeers at papal ascetism in its exultation in the physical splendour of a woman.³³

Saint Finnigal's name is the Celtic name Fionnaghal, rendered in an unattractive corrupted form. Undoubtedly this is deliberate, indicating that she represents a diluted and degenerate form of a once living culture. The Auchanarnish drinking-water comes from 'Saint Finnigal's well' (p. 13), and

³² RCAHMS, *Argyll*, VII, p. 261.

³³ Sorley MacLean, 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', *Ris a' Bhruthaich* (Stornoway: Acair, 1985), pp. 15-47 (19, 35). [Originally in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XXXVII, 1934-6]

we understand that she has at one time been part of the Celtic world-view in which water spirits (such as kelpies, discussed below) have considerable powers of good and evil. Phoebe thinks it 'probable that the kelpies are afraid' of her (p. 13), but we never see evidence of this.

She is one of the outdated symbols which Mitchison wants to replace by figures more 'potent and protecting'. The gules lion is at least in a natural sleep, 'lying on a thistle bed', but Saint Finnigal, eerily, is 'asleep, standing, with her eyes open but blank' (p. 165). It is possible that the gules lion will some day awake, but Saint Finnigal will remain 'not quite alive'. Moreover, at no point in the novel do the lion and the saint appear to be operating together. Mitchison sees no role for the Celtic Twilight in the new Scotland hoped for by Phoebe and Dione.

5. The Talking Crow

The Talking Crow as a symbol is personal to both Dione and Phoebe, forming part of the 'images of their common childhood' (p. 32). It is probably one of the 'various rather shapeless birds' depicted on a cup brought back from Greece by their father in his youth:

He used to show this cup to the girls and tell them [about] Peisthetairos, the Persuader, who met a Talking Crow which guided him to Cloud Cuckoo Borough ... (p. 8)

This is the story of Aristophanes' *The Birds*, first performed in 414 BC; Cloud Cuckoo Borough, the ideal city, fits well into Mitchison's consideration of an ideal Scotland.

[L]ater on Phoebe and Dione had seen that Peisthetairos, that determined and persuasive man, was Intellect and Imagination applied to life, and especially to dealings with people: [and] that the Talking Crow was the Daemon – the voice of reality that one has to follow. (pp. 8-9)

It is Dione's daemon, appearing when she needs to feel strong and reassuring her when she decides on some unconventional course of action. But since it is not her only ally – tractors and the gules lion also encourage

her from time to time – its meaning is not consistently carried through. This creature of classical Greek derivation sometimes shape-shifts to become briefly a Highland eagle (p. 47) and a hoodie crow (p. 123), perhaps indicating Mitchison's view of a common heritage of myth and her recognition of familiar elements in her growing consciousness of Scotland.

6. Seals

Two other symbols with personal rather than political and cultural relevance are seals and kelpies, not only symbols but figures of myth and folklore, notably Scottish traditional tales. In *We Have Been Warned*, however, neither plays a completely traditional role. Mitchison's view of these entities is peculiar to herself.

Seals – selkies – are, in tradition, generally good and lovable, a perception possibly deriving from the near-human appearance of their big eyes, and from their 'singing', both among themselves and, anecdotally, in response to a human singer on the shore.³⁴ The seal-woman, who slips out of her sealskin to bathe in human form and is obliged to marry the man who steals the skin, is a well-established figure of myth. Mitchison ignores or rejects most of this body of selkie lore, preferring the related, and also widespread, legend of the swan maiden.³⁵ (In a children's novel, *The Fairy who Couldn't Tell a Lie* (1963), she postulates two magical communities, the swans and the seals, constantly at war; her sympathies are firmly with the swans.)

The seals in *We Have Been Warned* are not seen as lovable. They are ambivalent in their behaviour towards humans, slippery in metaphor as in fact. '[They] were sometimes definitely malevolent and allied with the kelpies, and sometimes just asked questions and even played' (p.33). A similar ambiguity will be found in Mitchison's portrayal of fairies, discussed in chapter 8.

³⁴ See David Thomson, *The People of the Sea* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996). [Originally published 1954]

³⁵ See chapter 8 and Appendix II.

On the whole seals are unpleasant entities, if a degree less unpleasant than kelpies. Phoebe in a nightmarish daydream has a nasty encounter with them, though she tries 'to keep the seals arguing, for so long as there were seals the kelpies might not come'.

For a time [Phoebe] swam in a sea full of seals, coughing at her with musty breath, the smell of the seal islands off Jura. The seals asked her questions, mocked at her for never having waked the lion ... No, no, said Phoebe, battling with the bobbing heads of seals ... (p. 165)

It is tempting to suggest that the key to Mitchison's rejection of the selkie legend can be found in this passage. In real life she also 'swam in a sea full of seals', during the Craignish holidays which fed into the Auchanarnish sections of *We Have Been Warned*. Her encounter with 'the people of the sea' does not seem to have been suffused with magic.

We went swimming off Craignish Point among the seals, who clearly supposed that I, in my black rubber bathing cap, was one of them; when we landed on their stinking little island, they hardly moved to let us climb up. (*YMWA*, p. 214)

The Craignish seals appear in the pages of *We Have Been Warned*, though there has been a poetic transposition in the matter of the bathing cap.

The sea water goes by all those lonely places, and wherever they like the seals go with it, diving and wriggling through the currents, and they hump themselves out on to the rocks, or look all together in one direction with their sleek black rubber bathing-caps, and jump their dripping shoulders out of the water and cough angrily when they ask questions. Seals land on the rocks all down to the Mull and the rocks smell musty for weeks after they have been. (p. 14)

Perhaps it was the smell, observed in real life and transferred to fiction, that prevented Mitchison from adopting the romantic selkie of legend.

7. Kelpies

Kelpies, a pervasive presence in *We Have Been Warned*, are, unlike seals, always evil. Again, Mitchison's kelpies are not wholly those of tradition. The traditional kelpie appears in the form of a beautiful horse (water-horse, *each uisge*, is its alternative name), or sometimes as an

attractive young man or woman. In either case it tempts humans to closer acquaintance and drags them under the water to their death.³⁶ Both these versions of the kelpie, though malevolent, are more solid – almost more wholesome – than the creatures of Mitchison's imagination.

She appears to have blended elements of folklore with something stemming from her own childhood terrors. Near Cloan, her grandparents' house,

there was the Black Swelch ... a dark and frightening pool ... Once there was a dead sheep, white and shapeless, swirling in it, but I had a feeling that it might be the kelpie. (*ST*, p. 47).

Elsewhere, describing a favourite walk from Auchterarder to Glen Devon, she balances natural beauty with historical fact, considering the fate of the deserted steadings (a recurrent concern of hers, as we shall see in connection with her novel *The Big House*), but including another element in her description, apparently as much part of the landscape as the ruined crofts.

It was long since anyone had seen anything not canny hereabouts – or had told of it. Though we thought there might still be a kelpie or so, perhaps under the steepest slope of Craigrossie, in the Black Swelch.³⁷

The kelpies in *We Have Been Warned* are described only in scattered phrases, as if they are too horrible to be spoken about. 'One would know a kelpie by the feeling of dampness and then a damp touch' (p. 366). They have arms with which to reach out of the water and catch you; they 'join seaweedy fingers round one's throat to drag one back into the shadows' (p. 367). In a particularly vivid image, their arms might stretch out across the road, like seaweed, so that a car could skid on them and fall into the loch (pp. 166, 368). (These are salt-water kelpies living in sea lochs, as appropriate to the topography of Auchanarnish/Craignish.) Phoebe has attempted to make drawings of most of the 'images' which she shares with Dione, but 'as for the kelpies, if she had managed to draw them adequately, it would have been

³⁶ See Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, pp. 108-12.

³⁷ NM, 'To Glen Devon over the hill', *SMT Magazine*, 26 (September 1940), 16-19 (19).

such a horrid and terrifying drawing that she would have had to burn it at once' (p. 32).

Even more intense than the physical descriptions of the kelpies are the references to their malevolence. '[They] twisted everything and made it horrible and lonely, full of corners and evil magic' (p. 5). Their quality of insubstantial evil aligns them with 'They', the entities which so terrified the child Naomi Haldane that even in later years she could hardly write about them.

Mitchison's kelpies, however, also have much in common with the more indefinite water-spirits (sometimes but not always called kelpies) which, in tradition, inhabit Scottish lochs and rivers, and are akin to nixies, syrens and the Lorelei. In Scottish folklore most bodies of water – lochs, springs, wells and the sea – are inhabited by spirits which are sometimes benign but very often malevolent.³⁸ The wide spread of such legends is generally attributed to a recognition of the vital importance of water, essential to life but frequently a bringer of death through accident, flood or storm. Water itself is seen as having an elemental power. Hugh MacDiarmid touches on this belief in his short story 'The Waterside':

... the Waterside folk were brainless craturs. Brains were nae use there. To dae onything ava they'd to use something faur quicker than thocht - something as auld as the water itsel'. And thocht's a dryland thing and a gey recent yin at that.³⁹

Mitchison has postulated a more specific link:

[W]e in the north, in Scotland, have our own shapes in the water of loch and lynn [sic]. We can call them kelpies or water-horses in the days of our disbelief, but their power is of the Mother-Goddesses, demanding human sacrifice.⁴⁰

³⁸ See James Mackinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* (Llanerch, 1993). [Originally published 1893]

³⁹ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Waterside', *Annals of the Five Senses*, pp. 154-7 (156). [Originally published *Glasgow Herald*, 16 April 1927]

⁴⁰ NM, 'The Empty Places', 11.

A further reference in the notes to her 1947 novel *The Bull Calves* ties this belief firmly to the kelpies in *We Have Been Warned*.

There is certainly a connection between the mother-goddess archetype ... and the Celtic death-wish ... I believe the original Celtic archetypes or Gods were mostly of this nature, though they have degenerated into kelpies and such which may be exorcized by the sign of the cross or (as in *We Have Been Warned*) by some other symbol. (BC, pp. 503-4)

In the same note she links the child's night terrors to the matriarchal archetype, to be considered more closely in chapter 4. Though kelpies belong in part to her childhood, they arise originally, in her view, from the archetype of the Mother Goddess, who in different aspects is giver of both life and death.⁴¹ Liz Lochhead's poem 'What the Pool Said, On Midsummer's Day' personifies the concept.

I've led you by my garrulous banks, babbling
on and on till – drunk on air
and sure it's only water talking –
you come at last to my silence.
Listen, I'm dark
and still and deep enough.
Even this hottest gonging sun
on this longest day
can't white me out.
What are you waiting for?
I lie here, inviting, winking you in.⁴²

Emanations of the female principle, the kelpies are therefore more closely connected than may at first seem obvious with the questions about women which are posed so strongly in *We Have Been Warned*.

8. The Campbell Women

Though the two remaining entities who (sometimes literally) haunt Dione and Phoebe, the Campbell Women and Green Jean, have their importance as symbols, the balance has now shifted from the symbolic to the

⁴¹ See J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (Thames and Hudson, 1978), under Mother/Great Mother/Mother Goddess, pp. 108-9.

⁴² Liz Lochhead, 'What the Pool Said, on Midsummer's Day', *Dreaming Frankenstein* (Polygon, 1984), pp. 8-9.

supernatural. By far the most effective of the non-realistic beings in *We Have Been Warned* are the Campbell Women. The witch/ghost Green Jean is of greater importance in the plan of the novel, but they appear more often than she does, and are immensely more powerful and enigmatic. They have no source in legend or tradition. The concept of the Campbell Women is original to Mitchison.

Phoebe has drawn 'a hard and detailed picture of the Campbell Women ... [which] distressed the art mistress at school' (p. 32) and they are closely described in the novel.

The narrow, cruel, arrogant Highland face, the twisted lips, the thin overbred hands quick to twist and pinch! (p. 22)

As Auchanarnish is based on Craignish, so the Campbell Women (whose surname, incidentally, derives from the Gaelic *cam beul*, crooked mouth) are based, in physical appearance at least, on local landowners whom Mitchison met there and described in her letter to Stella Benson:

The gentry are rather alarming – these narrow cruel Highland faces, mouths and eyes a little twisted and arrogant and something too delicate and inbred about their hands and skin. (*YMWA*, p. 136)

Popular tradition, especially in the Highlands, tends to regard Clan Campbell as the villain, whatever the crime (as, for instance, in the legends which have accrued around the historical event of the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692), but at this very early stage of her involvement with Scotland it is at first surprising to find Mitchison so uncritically espousing this viewpoint. The reason is to be found in her family history, as she explains in one of the notes to *The Bull Calves*.

... I myself would have a slight vestigial hesitation in trusting an upper-class Campbell; I would feel myself minding in my blood and bones of my kinship with Montrose and my enmity with 'the master-fiend Argyll' ... (*BC*, p. 495)

Strictly speaking, Mitchison has no blood kinship with Montrose. His niece was the first wife of John Haldane of Gleneagles (1660-1721), while

Mitchison's descent is through a child of his second wife.⁴³ However, here she claims kinship, and she was evidently aided in forming her opinions through acquaintance with the romantic nineteenth-century ballad 'The Execution of Montrose' by W.E. Aytoun (1813-65).

They brought him to the Watergate,
Hard bound with hempen span,
As though they held a lion there,
And not a fenceless man.
They set him high upon a cart –
The hangman rode below –
They drew his hands behind his back,
And bared his noble brow.
Then, as a hound is slipped from leash,
They cheered the common throng.
And blew the note with yell and shout,
And bade him pass along. ...

But onwards – always onwards,
In silence and in gloom,
The dreary pageant laboured,
Till it reached the house of doom.
Then first a woman's voice was heard
In jeer and laughter loud,
And an angry cry and a hiss arose
From the heart of the tossing crowd:
Then, as the Graeme looked upwards,
He saw the ugly smile
Of him who sold his king for gold –
The master-fiend Argyle!⁴⁴

Mitchison's own early poem 'Scotland' indicates that the opposition of 'my people' and the Campbells was part of her vision of herself and her family, which later empowered her writing of *The Bull Calves*.

At the head of the glen of beeches stands Castle Campbell,
And above Castle Campbell
The mists come down from the hills.
Three hundred years ago
My people burnt Castle Campbell,
And now I am taking my English sons to see.⁴⁵

⁴³ See the family trees in *BC*, pp. [14-17].

⁴⁴ W. E. Aytoun, 'The Execution of Montrose', in *The Golden Treasury ...* ed. by F.T. Palgrave (Oxford World's Classics, rev. ed. 1941), pp. 391-7 (392, 393). Stanzas 4 and 7 (of 18) are quoted here.

Castle Campbell is near Dollar, not far from the Haldane houses of Gleneagles and Cloan. Though Dione and Phoebe in *We Have Been Warned* belong to a West Highland family, there is evidently still a continuity in Mitchison's mind with her own Perthshire background and her childhood experiences of Cloan.

The Campbell Women in *We Have Been Warned* are symbolic rather than historical figures. To the apparently axiomatic untrustworthiness of Campbells is added, in the scheme of the novel, class conflict between 'the gentry' and the socialist Dione. But their unpleasantness is heightened by Mitchison's depiction of them as figures of horror, possibly linked to her own night terrors. In a nightmare involving the wardrobe in her room, Dione hears the Campbell Women whispering (p. 347): Mitchison's childhood fears connected with furniture have been cited in chapter 1.

With their 'stiff, waxen smiles' (p. 165) the Campbell Women are somewhat reminiscent of the Ugly-Wuglies in the Edwardian children's book *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) by E. Nesbit. Mitchison recalls in her memoirs her childhood fondness for Nesbit's books (their possible influence on her own children's novel *The Big House* is considered in chapter 5): 'one looked forward passionately to the next' (*ST*, p. 69). She could have read *The Enchanted Castle* at the impressionable age of nine or ten, but was probably not aware of a horrific childhood experience reflected in the book, since it was originally described in a series of periodical articles before Mitchison was born.⁴⁶

Nesbit as a child was, like Mitchison, subject to nightmares and night terrors, but, abroad with her mother, looked forward to seeing the mummies in the crypt of St Michel at Bordeaux. Homesick for England, she thought they would be like the familiar exhibits in the British Museum. The reality was very different.

⁴⁵ NM, 'Scotland', *LB*, p. 47.

⁴⁶ See E. Nesbit, *Long Ago When I Was Young* (Beehive Books, 1987). [Originally published as 'My School Days', *Girl's Own Paper*, v. 18, October 1896-September 1897.]

[A]bout two hundred skeletons ... with the flesh hardened on their bones, with their long dry hair hanging on each side of their brown faces, where the skin in drying had drawn itself back from their gleaming teeth and empty eye-sockets. Skeletons draped in mouldering shreds of shrouds and grave-clothes, their lean fingers still clothed with dry skin, seemed to reach out towards me ... On the wall near the door I saw the dried body of a little child hung up by its hair.⁴⁷

Nesbit attributes 'nights and nights of anguish and horror, long years of bitterest fear and dread' to 'the shock of that sight' (p. 64). Over a period of time – the practice continued well into her adulthood – she constructed a series of 'mummies' of her own, effigies made from coathangers, umbrellas and bolsters, dressed up in hats, coats and gloves and provided with painted paper masks. In *The Enchanted Castle* these effigies appear as the terrifying Ugly-Wuglies, made by the young characters and unintentionally brought to life by a wish. Nesbit's biographer describes them in terms which bring to mind Mitchison's own childhood fears:

They are that ultimate in childhood terror – the not-person, the shape that looks alive but isn't, the dressing gown on the back of a door or the dress draped over a chair that terrifies the sleepy or delirious child. ... [T]hey fill both the children and onlookers with irrational terror.⁴⁸

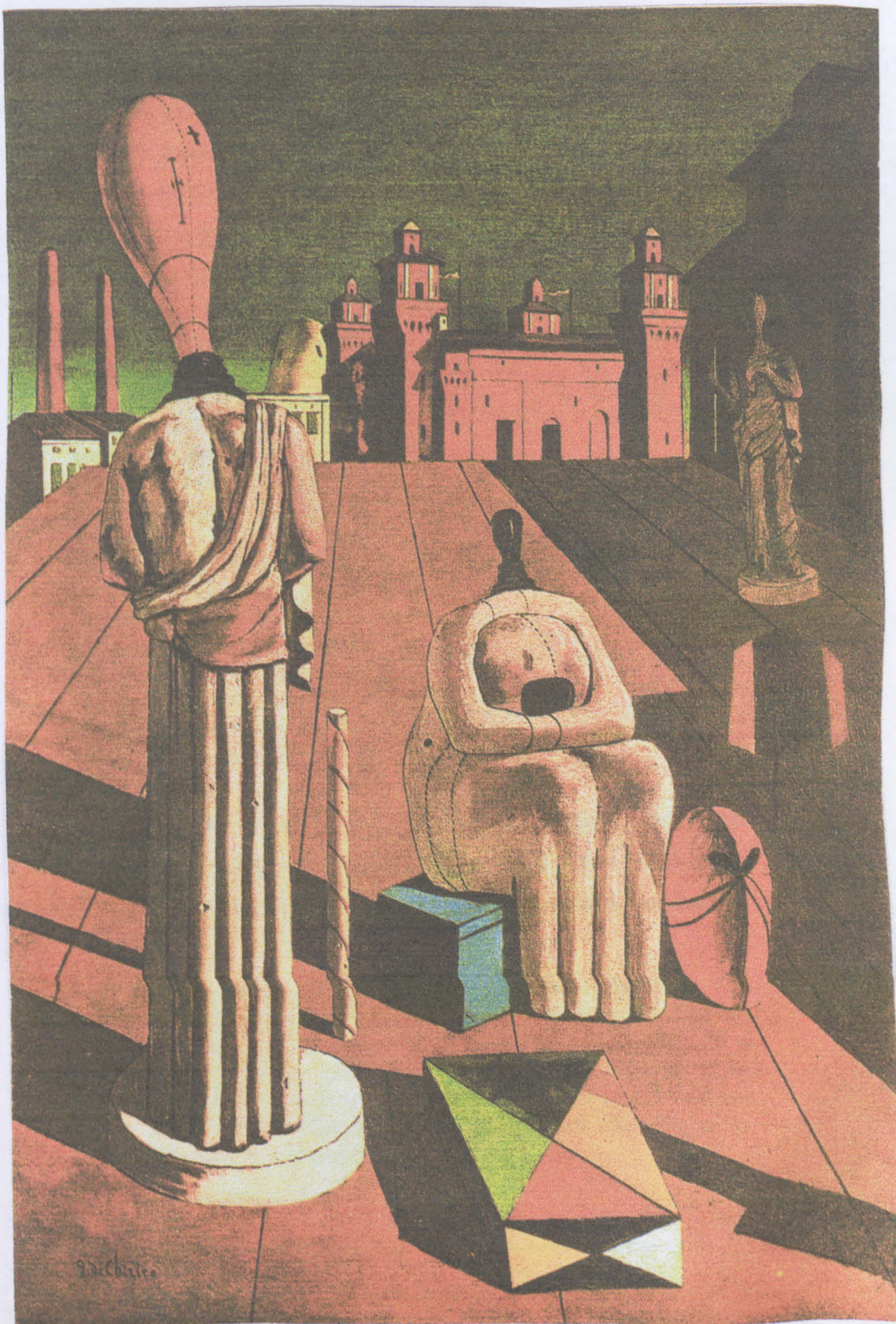
While Nesbit's earliest mummies were undoubtedly 'intended to exorcise memories of the crypt at Bordeaux', her biographer sees a further significance in their fictional form: 'At the same time the Ugly-Wuglies seem to symbolize a very different kind of horror – the emptiness of the bourgeoisie'.⁴⁹ Such a reading seems to be echoed in the bourgeois, yet malevolent, Campbell Women.

In *We Have Been Warned* itself, however, they are assigned an origin in – it may be assumed – Mitchison's adult life. Phoebe has experienced 'a deep and unpleasant shock' on meeting the Campbell Women 'in Chirico's pictures' (p. 33), the paintings of the early surrealist Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). A critic has noticed that 'menacing, empty spaces were a

⁴⁷ Nesbit, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Julia Briggs, *A Woman of Passion: the life of E. Nesbit* (Hutchinson, 1987), p. 266.

⁴⁹ Briggs, p. 266.



The Disquieting Muses (1916)

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978)

recurrent theme of de Chirico's paintings, suggesting the disoriented world of nightmares'⁵⁰ and in some of these empty spaces – for instance in the 1916 painting *The Disquieting Muses*⁵¹ – stand stiff faceless 'mannequins' (de Chirico's term) which do bear an eerie resemblance to Mitchison's Campbell Women. Sylvia Plath was also greatly affected by this painting, which inspired her poem of the same title.

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?...

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep.⁵²

A biographer notes that '[d]e Chirico opened to Sylvia a whole range of oneiric images ... subconscious symbols similar to those of her own dreams'⁵³, while Plath herself introduced the poem in a radio broadcast of 1961:

All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting, de Chirico's *The Disquieting Muses* – three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women – The Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, de Quincey's sisters of madness.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century* (Laurence King, 1996), p. 103.

⁵¹ There are also versions dated 1917 and 1918. See Uwe M. Schneede, *Surrealism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, [1974]), pp. 60-1.

⁵² Sylvia Plath, 'The Disquieting Muses', *Collected Poems*, pp. 74-6 (74, 76).

⁵³ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (Penguin Books, rev. ed. 1998), p. 124. [Originally published 1989]

⁵⁴ Quoted Stevenson, p. 124.

The Campbell Women in *We Have Been Warned* (their number unspecified by Mitchison; occasionally, as on p. 22, only one is present) fully embody the 'terrible ... sinister' characteristics apprehended by Plath. Two extended passages in which they feature have the authentic quality of nightmare. First Phoebe, at work in her studio, finds herself inexplicably afraid, and tries to locate which of her senses has 'sent the warning':

It was not sight, not touch; it was a noise, a fingering along the wall; she leaned forward to the window and as her face neared it on one side of the glass, the faces of the Campbell Women looked in and nodded to her from the other. (p. 163)

She flees, but they pursue her. There are hints of the tumbling surreal images which Mitchison would soon employ in *Beyond This Limit*, but the chase here is far more terrifying.

She tore past the croquet lawn and into the side door, and bolted it; she heard their fingers scrabble behind the panels ... When she turned the bed was empty, flat, the sheets coldly folded, a sketch for a bed. It became immediately clear that all this was not really her house, but its mirror image ... The Campbell Women came up the stairs, with stiff waxen smiles, into Phoebe's room, smiling that they had caught her. (pp. 164-5)

Even more alarming is Dione's experience when she is driving alone in the dark and convinces herself that the Campbell Women are in the back seat.

A Campbell Woman might lean over, just not touching so far, and say very politely through thin lips: 'Now let us have a little talk, Dione.' (p. 366)

The Campbell Women have by now made their position fairly clear. They are 'the Establishment' in its female persona, opposed to any woman who attempts to break out of the conventional female role. They harass Dione, a political activist, and Phoebe, an artist. Some sixty years later the poet Kathleen Jamie is still being harassed by the housewife entity she calls 'Wee Wifey'. Empowered by the advance of feminism and female

consciousness, she deals smartly with the demon, yet is aware of the continued existence of the homemaking persona. We remember again Mitchison's constant balancing of the conflicting claims of writing and motherhood.

I have a demon and her name is
WEE WIFEY
I caught her in a demon trap, the household of my skull.
I pinched her by her heel throughout her wily transformations
until
 she confessed
 her name indeed to be WEE WIFEY
and she was out to do me ill.

So I made great gestures like Jehova: dividing
land from sea, sea from sky.
my own self from wee wifey
(*There, she says, that's tidy!*)

Now I watch her like a dolly
keep an eye,
 and mourn her:
For she and I are angry/cry
 because we love each other dearly.
It's sad to note
 that without
 WEE WIFEY
I shall live long and lonely as a tossing cork.⁵⁵

9. Green Jean

The Campbell Women have a further importance in the novel, since they also harassed Dione's ancestor Jean MacLean in her role as 'witch'. Green Jean is thematically the most significant of the supernatural beings in *We Have Been Warned*, prominent at the beginning and end of the novel, though she enters Dione's thoughts only briefly at other times. She appears in the opening pages as Dione reads her story in 'a volume of criminal trials' (p. 4), and then again in the dystopian visions at the close, progressively more

⁵⁵ Kathleen Jamie, 'Wee Wifey', *Mr and Mrs Scotland are Dead* (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 129.

apocalyptic, which she triggers by encouraging Dione to look at the future through a pierced stone (p. 530).

Jean MacLean is an ancestress of Dione's (a family spirit, like the Weeper of Carradale, or the Brounie who will be discussed in chapter 5). She was tried for witchcraft at Inveraray in the mid-seventeenth century and acquitted, but five years later there was a Campbell raid on the castle of Auchanarnish 'when the men were away', and Jean, with her baby, was thrown out into the January night, where both froze to death in the snow. Since then she has haunted Auchanarnish as 'Green Jean'; Dione and Phoebe have seen her 'in the nursery corridor' (pp. 4-5).

Since Auchanarnish is so clearly Craignish, the reader's first impression is that Mitchison has chosen a local legend for her novel. However, no witch trials appear to have been held at Inveraray.⁵⁶ The Campbells would not have raided Craignish, since it was a Campbell castle (Mitchison makes Auchanarnish a MacLean castle; see p. 521). There is a Green Lady Bridge in the grounds of Craignish,⁵⁷ but another source may be the ghost called Green Jean at Pinkie House, known to Mitchison's mother as a girl⁵⁸ and therefore plausibly to Mitchison. The pierced stone belongs to the legend of the Brahan Seer in Easter Ross: 'I thought it was cast into the middle of a loch somewhere,' says Dione (p. 530), which was the fate of the Seer's stone.⁵⁹

Green Jean has thus been constructed by Mitchison from generic tales of green-lady ghosts, witch trials (which she uses again in *The Bull Calves*; see chapter 4), raids 'while the men are away' (a situation she later used in the short story 'The Hunting of Ian Og') (*FMS*, pp. 32-54), and fugitives freezing in the snow (as, for instance, in the popular legends of the Massacre of Glencoe), together with the Brahan Seer's stone, and, we may surmise, the

⁵⁶ None is recorded in the database of the Scottish Witchcraft Survey. See www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches

⁵⁷ See RCAHMS, *Argyll*, VII, pp. 259-62.

⁵⁸ Louisa Kathleen Haldane, *Friends and Kindred* (Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 126.

⁵⁹ Alexander Mackenzie, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* (Sutherland Press, 1970), p. 92. [Originally published 1877]

ambience of Craignish Castle, itself an architectural collage with sections of stonework dated to every century from the fourteenth to the twentieth.⁶⁰

Fictionally, the Green Jean story only just holds together. Its weakness becomes more evident when Green Jean is considered alongside her adversaries the Campbell Women. They boast to Dione that they 'got' Green Jean (p. 367), but it is not made clear how: it is never actually stated, for instance, that they accused her of witchcraft (though that is implied). They would certainly not have been in the raiding party which sacked the house, leading to Jean MacLean's flight and her death in the snow. The implication is, again, that they were in the background of the story, whispering in the ears of the judiciary and the warlike chieftains, as they are in the background of Dione's and Phoebe's lives.

This ghost has been constructed for a purpose. Mitchison, in the person of Dione, draws our attention, to begin with, to the question of whether Green Jean was in fact a witch. 'In the family everyone said that Jean MacLean had not been a witch; there were no such things as witches.' (p. 4) That is, as Mitchison indicates, the modern, rational view. Dione, however, is ... doubting and criticising the family tradition. On the evidence it seemed to her more than likely that Jean MacLean had been a witch, had belonged to this other, this oppressed secret society, and had probably had dealings with some pre-Celtic and conquered folk. (p. 4)

This seems to relate to the theory of witchcraft propounded by the archaeologist and folklorist Margaret Murray in 1921. Briefly stated, this theory, strongly influenced by *The Golden Bough*, is that 'witches' were practitioners of a surviving pre-Christian religion in which the central figure died and returned to life, representing the seasonal cycle and influencing the success of crops through sympathetic magic. Green Jean walks, after her death by cold, 'perhaps ... because a witch would rather be burnt and her ashes scattered on the fields' (p. 4). Though challenged even at its first publication, the Murray theory was influential for many years, and Mitchison

⁶⁰ See RCAHMS, *Argyll*, VII, pp. 259-62.

appears to make use of it in both *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves*.⁶¹

The suggestion is that Green Jean was a 'witch' in the sense that she was a powerful woman, and tried as such because she was a threat to the established order. Mitchison is aligning the past and present treatment of such women. Dione, the Labour activist constantly sidelined to the position of candidate's wife (as was Mitchison during the 1931 general election: see *YMWA*, pp. 184-7), muses 'Perhaps the witch group, the coven, was stronger than the Labour Group' (p. 114), and Green Jean herself makes the comparison explicit: 'You and your coven are in danger, Isobel Dione.' (p. 529)

Given the likenesses which we have noticed between Mitchison and her central characters, it seems clear that she is protesting the limitations of her own position as an 'unconventional' mid-twentieth century woman. Though slightly obscured in the novel's over-elaboration of structure and content, this, extending into the by-election scenes and the Russian episodes, can be seen to be the main theme of *We Have Been Warned*.

Equally in danger of being overlooked – as it has been so far by critics – is the symbolist power of the novel. While the nine symbols listed earlier are threaded throughout the book, there are four important symbolist scenes in which Phoebe and Dione can be seen to swing between political and personal concerns. They are Phoebe's vision of Scotland (pp. 10-15): 'The gules lion is asleep like any donkey on a bed of thistles and I am left alone with the sea and the kelpies and the Campbell women ...' (p. 15); her thoughts during the dance (pp. 25-33): 'Gules lion, wake, lion of Scotland. ... [T]he dance is full of Campbell Women and kelpies!' (pp. 27, 31); Dione's night drive (pp. 366-9) during which she tries to sing 'The Red Flag' to drown out the voices of the Campbell Women in the back seat; and, most notably, Phoebe's waking nightmare (pp. 163-9). Here all nine symbols are utilised in a passage clearly central to the meaning of the novel.

⁶¹ See Appendix I.

Phoebe is working on an illustration for the Andersen fairy tale 'Kay and Gerda' ('The Snow Queen'), thinking about the representation of fantasy. When kelpies, the Campbell Women and the Elephant come into her mind, she is therefore hardly surprised, 'But she was still frightened. She had evoked these things somehow' (p. 163). She hears 'a noise, a fingering along the wall' and sees the terrifying Campbell Women outside the window. She flees them through a surreal mirror-image version of her house, jumps out of the window as they draw near, and finds herself in 'the Debatable Land. The land between here and fairyland' (p. 165). She is mocked by the seals (in a Craignish landscape) and the kelpies and the Campbell Women are waiting for her.

Now she is imprisoned, with Green Jean, in a dark tower in a forest, besieged by the Campbell Women. But rescue arrives:

[I]t was a plow tractor making a furrow through the forest, a furrow for sowing fern seed. Dione was driving the tractor, Dione with her hair flying behind her ... Dione turned the tractor on to the Tower, and crash and smash went the sides of the Tower, splitting neatly in two as the furrow went through it, and Phoebe fell into the seat of the tractor beside her sister, and behind them the furrow opened and parted like a wave. (p. 168)

The tower and the forest are familiar images from fairy tale, legend and myth: Rapunzel is shut up in a tower and the Babes in the Wood are lost in a forest. While other readings are possible, the tower may be a phallic symbol.⁶² Perhaps Dione, aboard the tractor of open-hearted comradeship, is liberating Phoebe from the constriction of conventional marriage (and again it is hard not to see a tongue-in-cheek comment on Mitchison's own marital and extra-marital relationships).

In any case, she is cutting a furrow through the forest:

Since ancient times the near-impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious.⁶³

⁶² Cooper, p. 175.

⁶³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Penguin Books, 1991), p. 94. [Originally published 1976]

It is 'a furrow to sow fern seed', which has magic connotations, being particularly effective when gathered on Midsummer Eve.⁶⁴ Mitchison links midsummer and sexuality in her poem 'The Midsummer Apple Tree', from the same period as *We Have Been Warned*, quoted in chapter 2, and here she links the twentieth-century image of the tractor with the fertility magic of plowing⁶⁵ and seedtime in a way which is surely meant to be directly reminiscent of the Plowing Eve scenes in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Where in that novel the King approaches the Queen and 'the Corn [opens] the Furrow' (p. 245), Dione's role here is an active one. If, thundering to her sister's rescue aboard a tractor of the revolution, she is a slightly comic figure, she is opening a furrow and so, in this strongly feminist novel, is the Corn King, not the Spring Queen.

Through her use of symbols interpenetrating everyday life, Mitchison postulates a society supported and strengthened by its own mythology. Nevertheless this society is imperfect if it denies or negates the potential contribution of women, attuned as they are (in the Murray theory) to an older mythology. In developing her own system of symbols for *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison has provided a schema – perhaps inexact and irregular, but passionately presented – for a world in which Dione, and she herself, can influence both present and future.

⁶⁴ Tess Darwin, *The Scots Herbal* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1996), p. 58.

⁶⁵ Mitchison's preferred spelling throughout her work.

CHAPTER 4

Witches and women (2): *The Bull Calves*

Hell-fire preached in Auchterarder
Has shaken sinners to deathly fear: ...
The word in the Faithful works and gripes;
But Ruthven Water is flowing clear ...¹

Though *We Have Been Warned* contains several important scenes set in the West Highlands of Scotland, *The Bull Calves* (1947) is the first full-length fiction by Naomi Mitchison which can be considered an entirely Scottish novel. It is a historical novel (the product of extensive and thorough research, as evidenced in the notes which occupy over a hundred pages at the end of the text), set in Perthshire in 1747, in a Scotland only forty years into political union with England and more recently disturbed by the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745.

A further element in its design may perhaps be more evident now than at the time of publication, though the correspondence must always have been obvious to some extent. As in 1747 the country was recovering from the effects of the Jacobite risings, so in 1947, with the rest of Europe, it was recovering from those of World War II. Douglas Gifford points out that this was probably part of Mitchison's plan from the earliest stages.

The poem which prefaces *The Bull Calves*, 'Clemency Ealasaid', 'July 1940', movingly expresses the desire for regeneration – and should tell us clearly that the nineteen-forties are a backcloth for the novel which must be constantly kept in sight.²

¹ From NM, 'Strathearn', *FMS*, p. 116.

² Douglas Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', in *Studies in Scottish fiction: twentieth century*, ed. by Joachim Schwend and Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 219-41 (222).

The Bull Calves should therefore be recognised as a 'state of Scotland' novel, and Kirstie, the central character, as 'a manifestation of Scotland itself'.³ Written during World War II and published in the uncertain years immediately after the war, the novel with its peaceful and optimistic ending may be seen as bravely affirmative of the process of recovery and regeneration.

It is now generally assessed under two aspects: as a historical novel, and as a consideration of 'the matter of Scotland', in both 1747 and 1947. Thematically and technically it is a considerable achievement. *The Bull Calves* was Mitchison's major piece of fiction writing during World War II, and she worked on it for five or six years, constantly interrupted by wartime events and domestic difficulties. Though, as is clear from *Among You Taking Notes*, she found these interruptions frustrating in the highest degree, it seems in hindsight that the necessarily slow rate of progress may have allowed a fuller and eventually more satisfactory development of the novel. In comparison to *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison's handling of narrative structure and characterisation has advanced in sophistication. A brief plot summary will indicate the ground covered.

Kirstie, daughter of the Haldanes of Gleneagles, is spending a few days at the family home with her second husband, William Macintosh. There are tensions in the gathering, partly due to the recent 1745 rising, and partly to a certain suspicion of William, who as a Highlander is automatically distrusted by the stolid Lowland Haldanes, and whose recent past in America is something of a mystery. Through a series of conversations and reminiscences the reader learns (though not all the characters are fully informed) that William has lived with American Indians and married an Indian woman, and that Kirstie, during her unhappy first marriage, was involved with a coven of witches.

In a sub-plot, some of the younger Haldanes shelter a Jacobite fugitive. This secret is discovered by another guest, Macintosh of Kyllachy, who hopes to implicate William; he is personally and politically antagonistic

³ Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 224.

to William and may have betrayed him in the past. The matter is resolved by a *deus ex machina* figure, Duncan Forbes of Culloden, through whose advice 'the thing [comes] out as well as it could do' (*BC*, p. 389). The tensions between the Haldanes and William are also somewhat eased and the novel ends in peace: 'And after that love and sleep were at them and closed over them, and outwith the house day was breaking over the Ochils' (p. 406).

The stories interlock smoothly and an apparently effortless dramatic coherence is achieved. The novel is set in a single location, the house of Gleneagles, and the foreground action is confined to the space of two days, though other scenes and times are evoked in vivid reminiscence. Mitchison thus lays down a deliberately rigid framework for her novel, from which she probes both outward and inward, exploring her characters, the society around them, and the past experiences which have brought them to this point.

Mitchison pays close attention to historical realism, infusing her novel with rich detail of eighteenth-century social life drawn from contemporary sources. She also makes a conscious effort to 'give the feel of a colour, a people, above all a country' through the language of the novel (see *BC*, pp. 407-12). She points out that 'none of this is what people in the eighteenth century actually spoke', and that she has crafted a stylised language for her purposes. This language is used for both dialogue and narrative, scenes and events often being presented in the voice of one of the characters.

They were walking up and down on the bowling green, elderly folk, all the lot of them; yet they looked happy. And how could one be happy at all, she thought, if one was not young? (p. 21)

Behind and beyond these technical questions lies Mitchison's purpose in writing *The Bull Calves*. The immediate intention is expressed in *Among You Taking Notes*, where the genesis and progress of the novel take their natural place among other diary entries. Soon after the death of her newborn baby in July 1940, Mitchison's doctor suggests that, presumably as therapy, she 'should start writing a book' (*AYTN*, p. 73). At first she envisages a history book, but her diary entries are soon mentioning 'this long novel I have

in mind' (p. 145). Even at this early stage she is clear that there is a purpose to this book:

... if only I can do something for my own people in Scotland. I would like of course, just for once, to be a best seller ... But it doesn't matter ... I want to write history for two or three dozen people [who have previously praised her historical novels] ... I want to write like a bit of history in *The Blood of the Martyrs*, which probably nobody has noticed, but it is first class stuff. And then I want to write for people here [in Carradale] – to make them confident and happy. (p. 159)

She expands on the last point in an article written in 1948, though at that time, a year after the publication of the novel, she does not say, and perhaps does not yet know, whether it has had any effect.

During the writing of my last book [BC] I spent some time in reading parts of it aloud to people who had not more than an elementary education, and whose work had been of such an arduous manual kind as to leave them with little time for aesthetic appreciation. I tried my book out on them to see if it was intelligible, and whether it interpreted for them the thoughts that they could not speak, and whether it helped to dispel certain kinds of social lies from their minds.⁴

Thus, as laird of Carradale, she is, as she sees it, writing for her people, both in the near-literal sense described, and in the more metaphorical sense of dedication.

In addition she is writing from a family heritage of which she is constantly aware. The novel draws for many of its characters on an eighteenth-century generation of her Haldane ancestors, and she sees it as being written for the Haldanes, whose line continues in her own generation. An encounter in Edinburgh during her research for *The Bull Calves* crystallises this concept.

Later I read in the National Library, being equally well received by the Librarian there, Meikle, who ... came out to get me things, to show me how I could get books for myself, and to help me with economic stuff. ... Meikle is, I think, a good Radical, not a bit Jacobite ... But [he] saw me as part of Scottish history, descendant and representative of the Haldanes and indeed of all the great families whose blood is mixed in mine – for indeed there is scarcely one of them that isn't represented, Highland and Lowland. And I felt in turn the pride and responsibility,

⁴ NM, 'Writers in the Soviet – and in Britain', *Forward*, 42 (3 April 1948), 2.

immediately, that I had to write the hell of a good book, that I had to explain something very important, that it was laid on me. (AYTN, pp. 169-70)

This idealistic perception sustains Mitchison during the writing of *The Bull Calves*, and she thinks that the book may be ‘very good, better than *Corn King and Spring Queen*’ (AYTN, p. 202).

Her view was not entirely shared by reviewers at the time of publication. The complexity of *The Bull Calves* was not at first fully appreciated, and its lukewarm reception by both critics and general readers disappointed Mitchison. Some years later a little bitterness breaks through as she reviews a first novel by a young Scottish writer, Margaret Hamilton’s *Bull’s Penny* (1950): ‘I have had some experience myself of writing for my own race and the heartbreak it can be. Never mind, Margaret Hamilton, if this isn’t a best-seller!’⁵

Reviewers in 1947 appear to have been somewhat perplexed by *The Bull Calves*. The critic in *The Scots Review* begins with a dissertation on historical fiction in general:

The writing of historical fiction is an erudite and austere business nowadays. Scott was liberal enough in the provision of notes ... But his delight in the manners, the colour and external trappings of bygone periods is now regarded as naïve ... The contemporary writer of historical fiction ... is at pains to show that his theses or new interpretations of historical figures are based on the best sources.

Proceeding to the book under review, however, he has difficulty in making it fit his own thesis. It does have ‘copious notes’, he admits, but

[P]edantry is the last thing of which one could accuse [NM]. She has not much in common with Scott ... But the novel glows with warmth and gusto. ... If you like the 18th century, you will find an embarrassment of riches in *The Bull Calves*.⁶

Even a favourable review like that in the *Times Literary Supplement* expresses doubts.

⁵ NM, ‘From the Croft to the Clyde’, *Forward*, 44 (14 October 1950), 2.

⁶ Stewart Angus, ‘Books’, *The Scots Review*, 8 (June 1947), 47.

[W]e catch a picture of the life of Scotland two centuries ago which is wonderfully vivid and which bears the stamp of truth, both factual and imaginative. But with a reckless courage that one cannot but admire, Mrs Mitchison has attempted to pack into this one novel her knowledge of Scotland, her feelings about Scotland, her own family history and her views on witchcraft, agriculture and politics. None of these, of course, is material unfit for fiction ... All of it is interesting ... but it has hardly been fused into a novel. What perhaps will linger longest in the memory will be ... the picture of a Scottish country house, with its open doors and easy hospitality, the generous table and kindly relationships, the freedom and forthrightness of the lasses and the dancing to the pipes on the lawn through the long, light summer evenings.⁷

What is the problem? The impression gained from both these reviews is that *The Bull Calves* is not, in the reviewers' eyes, a proper historical novel. They have preconceived expectations of the genre which *The Bull Calves* does not meet. Neither reviewer, it may be noted, refers to Mitchison's earlier career as a highly regarded historical novelist. It is as if the shift from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Scotland has moved the writer into another genre. In the eyes of its contemporary reviewers, *The Bull Calves* is something apart, a *Scottish* historical novel.

As such, two possible models would have been known to critics in 1947. The first comprises the triumvirate of Scott, Stevenson and Neil Munro, and, more realistically, their nineteenth- and twentieth-century followers. 'She has not much in common with Scott,' the *Scots Review* critic remarks. If he had added 'but why should she?' he would have been ahead of his time.

The Scott model, well-tried and recognisable, typically has a male hero, generally admirable, often on a quest through the romantic Highlands, often involved in momentous historical events. In fact, Scott, Stevenson and Munro frequently subvert this model, questioning, for instance, the romance of the Highlands or the infallibility of the hero, but such nuances are not always to be found in their followers, and it may be these more derivative novels, some way after Scott in every sense, which contemporary reviewers of *The Bull Calves* have in mind.

⁷ *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 April 1947, p. 193.

The second possibility is that reviewers – and readers, for the book did not sell well – may have expected Mitchison, as a woman writer, to follow the line of such popular novelists as Margaret Irwin (1889-1969), Jane Oliver (1903-70), and Jean Plaidy (1906-93). Their historical romances were among the best-sellers of the 1940s and 1950s. Here, typically, the central character is a woman, but she is in general a queen, princess or duchess, occasionally playing a part in historical events in her own right, but often viewed as wife or lover of a significant male figure. In spite of Mitchison's admission that she would like 'just for once, to be a best seller', it was no doubt evident to her that she would never join these writers with *The Bull Calves*.

She is not following either of these models. She bypasses the Forty-Five rising in favour of a consideration of eighteenth-century agriculture, and chooses for her central characters members of the minor Scottish gentry. Her perception, unlike that of the *TLS* reviewer quoted above, is that such a house as Gleneagles (and such lasses) may be in fact the focus of history. This subverts conventions of Scottish historical fiction, and her achievement therefore goes unrecognised.

Modern critics, however, recognise the epic quality of *The Bull Calves*. When, in a process of rediscovery, a paperback edition appeared in 1985, it was hailed as 'a permanently important book'⁸ and as a novel which 'takes its place with power and dignity beside [Scott's] great previous fictions'.⁹

It is now possible to identify what Mitchison is doing in *The Bull Calves*, and how successfully she does it. She is making a comment on Scotland, in 1947 as well as in 1747, and setting out her hope of recovery and regeneration. This process is taking place both on the social and national planes and on the personal level: in the poem 'Clemency Ealasaid' which

⁸ Robert Calder, 'Taking notes – Modern Epic Writing', *Chapman*, 46 (Winter 1986-7), 76-8 (p. 78).

⁹ Douglas Gifford, 'Perspectives on the past', *Books in Scotland*, 20 (Spring 1986), 10-14, 27 (p.14).

prefaces the novel (pp. 11-15) she explicitly links it to the death of her baby.¹⁰ She is also commenting on the potential for conflict between Lowland and Highland Scotland. Mitchison had observed this dichotomy in her own milieu and time, remarking in the previously quoted review:

[*Bull's Penny* is] about my own part of the world [the West Highlands] ... where Gaeldom and Lowlands meet and you get the worst of both. Sometimes the best too; but it is a cultural whirlpool with two sets of values dragging the swimmers under.¹¹

In the marriage of Kirstie the Lowlander and William the Highlander, Mitchison presents the reconciliation of these two cultures.

While depicting and paying tribute to her Haldane ancestors – the characters of the novel are firmly based in her family history – she is also acknowledging the continuation of her family traditions into the present day. Gleneagles, the location of the novel, was in both 1747 and 1947 (and into the twenty-first century) the seat of the senior branch of the Haldane family, Mitchison's relations on her father's side. James Haldane and Catherine Duncan, whose forthcoming marriage is adumbrated at the end of *The Bull Calves*, are Mitchison's direct ancestors.¹²

Kirstie Haldane is a special case, as Mitchison explains in the notes to the novel.

[I]n real life, Kirstie and Black William, my hero and heroine [sic], are only names in two family trees. They died young. I have given them the lives they might have had, the child they might have had. (p. 407)

And indeed Kirstie can be found in the Haldane family tree: 'Christian, d. young'.¹³ Thus Mitchison is free to construct her as a fictional character, authentic and attractive in her eighteenth-century setting, yet with symbolic importance as one of 'the bull calves', the Lowland Haldanes, who are seen in contrast to, yet in harmony with, the Highlander, Black William Macintosh.

¹⁰ See Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996), particularly chapter 8, 'Constructing the future through the past: Naomi Mitchison's brave new world', pp. 139-65.

¹¹ NM, 'From the Croft to the Clyde', p.2.

¹² See family tree, *BC*, pp. [16-17], and Sir J. Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Haldanes of Gleneagles* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1929), p. xxi and passim.

It has been noted that Kirstie is another character who bears a certain resemblance to Mitchison herself. In this case it is not only the text which prompts the suggestion. The title page of the first edition of *The Bull Calves* is illustrated with a vignette by Louise Richard Annand (not included in later paperback editions) depicting the characters Kirstie and William. The strong middle-aged face of Kirstie resembles contemporary photographs of Naomi Mitchison, though since Annand was a friend of Mitchison's it may have been drawn from life. The portrait of Black William is recognisably drawn from a photograph, dating from the early stages of Mitchison's work on *The Bull Calves*, of Denis Macintosh, a Carradale fisherman.¹⁴ Denis Macintosh was a close friend of Mitchison's, in particular during her early years in Carradale, as evidenced by many references to him throughout *Among You Taking Notes* (see for instance pp. 41, 161-4, 284). The nature of their relationship is not entirely clear, but, at least as the source of an image, Denis Macintosh seems to appear in *The Bull Calves*. His contribution, if any, to Mitchison's conception of Black William has yet to be assessed.

There is a further dimension to the novel, a plot strand particularly important from the viewpoint of this thesis, which seems to have completely baffled contemporary reviewers. This is the story of Kirstie's involvement, some years before the date of the main action, with a coven of witches.

The poet and critic Douglas Young, a friend of Mitchison's with similar socialist and nationalist sympathies, acknowledges the novel's importance at one level, remarking that 'it is a good idea to portray the social and political development of nations through their impact on particular families' (he cites as examples Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* and several European novels), and noting that this has not yet been done for Scotland: 'Therefore Naomi Mitchison's venture is all the more notable as a pioneer effort in the interpretation of Scottish history.' He sees no farther, however, adding in a

¹³ Haldane, *The Haldanes*, p. xxi.

¹⁴ The photograph is among the illustrations to NM's article 'Village Play-Making', *SMT Magazine*, 28 (November 1941), 23-5 (p. 25).

slightly puzzled way: 'There is a tremendous digression on witch-mania'.¹⁵ The *Scots Review* critic quoted earlier also has trouble with what he considers to be digressions.

It is not by any means a well-finished novel. Mrs Mitchison is too prodigal of incidents, characters and information to care much about technical refinements. The opening chapter in which Aunt Kirsty [sic] talks at inordinate length to her niece and traverses wide tracts of social, economic and agricultural affairs has no pretensions to dramatic plausibility ... The excursion to the backwoods of America in the recapitulation of Uncle William's career and the exploration of witchcraft in terms of modern psychology could well be spared.¹⁶

Present-day reviewers, fortunately more sympathetic and perceptive than this, are ready to consider the question of witchcraft as a fully justifiable facet of *The Bull Calves*, of equal importance with the outward presentation of eighteenth-century society and the underlying commentary on twentieth-century Scotland. It is now recognised that the witchcraft references are no digression, but an integral part of Mitchison's plan.

Contrivance is a fact of literature which emphasises the shaping function. The legend of Satanist witchcraft, by Naomi Mitchison's shaping, becomes a parable of moral fanaticism, and a frame within which historical, psychological, indeed novelistic and political material is organised. Liberation from fanaticism, from identification of politics with religion, is a theme she develops in the novel and in the supplementary material.¹⁷

Mitchison's authorial stance on the question of witchcraft, however, can still be seen as puzzling. Douglas Gifford identifies

her third major sub-theme, that of the inability of the rational and practical mind to claim complete knowledge of the world ... This sub-theme can be read throughout the novel as a statement allowing the possibility of the supernatural, with its most disturbing moments occurring when Kirstie sees things that she (and Mitchison) allow to have independent life – that is, they are not simply psychological manifestations within Kirstie projected by her onto the external world, but Evil in objectively real action ... [T]he reader genuinely finds difficulty in 'reading' Mitchison's position towards the [witch] trials

¹⁵ Douglas Young, 'Naomi Mitchison's social and historical novel: the story of the Haldanes', *Forward*, 41(7 June 1947), 2.

¹⁶ Angus, p. 47.

¹⁷ Calder, 'Taking notes', p. 77.

and atrocities ... [and] is left feeling that there are two Mitchisons; one intensely organised and practical about the way forward for Scotland, and another lingering fascinated over the survival of actual Evil and the supernatural.¹⁸

The contradictions in Mitchison's life and apparently in her outlook, giving the impression that there are (at least) 'two Mitchisons', have been commented on earlier. The witchcraft strand in *The Bull Calves*, and Mitchison's treatment of it, can be seen as further evidence of this dichotomy.

Like the setting and characters of the novel, the presentation of witchcraft and the supernatural is based on historical fact and local knowledge. Mitchison has drawn on the superstitions of the area around Gleneagles and Auchterarder, familiar to her from childhood holidays at Cloan. The house of Cloan, purchased by her grandfather in 1852,¹⁹ clearly cannot figure as a family home in the eighteenth-century setting of *The Bull Calves*, but the surrounding countryside is effectively evoked, and its legends are introduced through the character Phemie Reid, a former nursemaid to Kirstie and the other Haldane children at Gleneagles. It is indicated, indeed (p. 326), that Phemie is a witch, or thinks she is, a distinction which will be examined later in this chapter.

The tradition of witchcraft in the area was well known to Mitchison. Her poem 'Strathearn' considers the execution of Maggie Wall, burned as a witch in 1657 near the village of Dunning.²⁰

They burnt a witch by the kirk at Dunning
On a cruel fire of choking coal.
The smoke went streeling, thinning away;
Up on the Ochils you would not see
The wee bright lowe on a summer day
Nor hear the shriek of a passing soul ...²¹

Equally famous, or infamous, in the history of the area and of Scottish witchcraft are the 1662 witch trials at Crook of Devon. The standard local

¹⁸ Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 236.

¹⁹ Haldane, *The Haldanes*, p. 221.

²⁰ *Historic Dunning* [leaflet] (Dunning Community Council, n.d.).

²¹ NM, 'Strathearn', *FMS*, p. 116.

history of the Auchterarder district includes a record of them, running to some forty pages.²² Mitchison summarises the content in her notes to *The Bull Calves* (pp. 498-500), and comments:

Most of the people in my book are also [i.e., like NM herself] in a state of suspended judgment, but are rather readier to believe seriously in certain supernatural manifestations, and especially in witchcraft, because that was still a general social belief and had been approved by the theocracy, at any rate until quite recently. (p. 498)

If Mitchison departs from historical fact in expanding the brief life of the actual Christian Haldane into her character Kirstie, she does so again, just as boldly, by bringing the main protagonist in another classic witch trial, as a fictional character, into the action of her novel. Writing, in the notes to *The Bull Calves*, on the documentation of the novel, she alludes to what she has done: 'Andrew Shaw of Bargarran [Kirstie's first husband] was not, I am glad to say, a real person, though there were plenty like him; but his sister was real.' (p. 407)

Christian Shaw of Bargarran (born c. 1686), fictionally the sister-in-law of Kirstie Haldane, is historically the central figure of the Paisley witch trials of 1697. She was not one of the accused (of whom six were executed, while one was found dead in prison) but the accuser.²³ The case follows the pattern of the witch trials of 1692 in Salem, Connecticut, in that a young girl begins to suffer strange seizures, inexplicable to the medical science of the time, and accuses a number of people of afflicting her by means of witchcraft.

Historically, Christian Shaw recovered her health completely (before the trial and execution of her alleged tormentors), married a minister, was widowed after only two or three years, and then embarked on a career, an unusual course for a woman in the early eighteenth century. She set up her

²² Alexander G. Reid, *The Annals of Auchterarder and Memorials of Strathearn* (Crieff: David Philips, 1899), pp. 211-52.

²³ For a good overview of the case see S.W. MacDonald et al, 'The Bargarran Witchcraft Trial – a psychiatric reassessment', *Scottish Medical Journal*, 41 (1996), 152-8. See also Isabel Adam, *Witch Hunt* (Macmillan, 1978), a fictionalised account closely based on contemporary sources.

own mill for the spinning of a fine, strong thread suitable for lacemaking, which was sold under the trademark of the Bargarran coat of arms. Her enterprise is regarded as the origin of the thread industry which became the economic cornerstone of the whole Paisley area. There is no indication of any further connection with allegations of witchcraft. After marrying again, Christian Shaw moved to Edinburgh, and no more is known of her life. The date of her death is not known.

As Mitchison's notes to *The Bull Calves* make clear, a number of historical characters, besides members of the Haldane family – for instance, Duncan Forbes of Culloden (1685-1747) – do appear in the novel. She has filled out their characters from contemporary sources (and, in the case of her Haldane ancestors, from traits observed in her own generation).²⁴ In the case of Christian Shaw, as in that of Kirstie Haldane, she has gone further, constructing a fictional character from historical references for the purposes of her novel.

Her divagations from historical fact, and the purpose behind them, make an interesting study. Christian Shaw's age in *The Bull Calves* is historically accurate: she is an older woman of whom Kirstie is slightly in awe, and would indeed have been about thirty years old in 1716, when the fictional Kirstie marries as a seventeen-year-old (pp. 21, 89). However, she is 'older than her brother' Andrew, Kirstie's husband (p. 89), and no younger brother of that name features in the family of the historical Christian Shaw.²⁵ The principal facts of Christian's life are referred to during the course of *The Bull Calves*: her involvement with the witch trials (pp. 91, 257), her first marriage (p. 96), and her career in the nascent textile industry (pp. 123-5). She has died some years before the setting date of the novel (pp. 125-6). As we have noted, in historical fact her actual date of death is unknown. The death-bed scene described in retrospect by Kirstie, with its striking image of

²⁴ See notes to *BC*, passim.

²⁵ See Adam, p. 20, for the Shaw family in 1696. If Andrew was born after 1696 he would be a very young minister in 1716; we have seen that Mitchison says he is fictional.

‘the byous strange look on the face of my good-sister when she lay dying’ (p. 154), is therefore complete fiction.

The extent and nature of the historical Christian Shaw’s involvement with witchcraft have been frequently debated.²⁶ Theoretically, therefore, Mitchison was free to depict her character as, for instance, a neurotic, a dupe or a witch. In fact the presentation of Christian Shaw in the novel is highly ambiguous. On one reading, Mitchison appears to be implying that she was in fact involved with witches as a girl, and that she continued to be so in later life. The former accusation is probably best described as not proven, and the latter is unsupported by any historical evidence. The status to be afforded to Mitchison’s suggestion is an important factor in our reading of the witchcraft strand in *The Bull Calves*.

If, in the framework of the novel, we accept that Christian Shaw was, in popular terms, a witch, then she introduced Kirstie to a coven of witches: ‘I told you, William, it was my good-sister, it was Christian Shaw of Bargarran, that brought me to the knowledge of *them* and their doings.’ (p. 163). In this view, Kirstie became a member of the coven and learned the black art of causing harm by the use of a wax image, a form of sympathetic magic.

‘And they telt me what to do, William, and we made the image of wax with the clippings of Andrew’s hair in’t, and we did what we shouldna do, and he grew ill ... and syne he died and it was I that killed him!’ (p. 164)

But, as Gifford indicates in the passage quoted above, the witch-related events in *The Bull Calves* are problematic. Perhaps they are all in Kirstie’s mind. The business of the ‘strange look’ on the face of the dying Christian Shaw is a good example of just such an ambiguous episode. We know of it only through Kirstie’s narrative, which, like all the narratives in *The Bull Calves*, has been edited in the telling according to the purpose of the speaker or the identity of the listener.²⁷ There is no corroboration: if other people were

²⁶ See Adam, pp. 220-34, and MacDonald et al, for various theories.

²⁷ See Gifford, ‘Forgiving the Past’, passim.

present at Christian Shaw's deathbed, we do not know what, if anything, they saw or surmised. If we understand that Christian was indeed a witch, then the 'strange look' is to be interpreted as the expression of a dying witch facing, like Faust, the devil's foreclosure on the pact or covenant she has made with him, under the terms of which she is now bound for hell. (Though Kirstie does not expand on what she reads in the 'strange look', there can be little doubt that she knows about the demonic pact, since it was a central element in most Scottish witch trials.²⁸) However, given a background of information about witch pacts in general and Christian Shaw's childhood experiences in particular, Kirstie could equally well have imagined the look, or its meaning, or both.

Similarly Andrew's death in the pulpit, 'when the heart's blood burst forth of him and over the Book' (p. 164) is just as rationally explicable as, for instance, the death of Robert Colquhoun in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*, which in fact it rather resembles ('all the pages of the Bible below she saw soaked in the stream of blood from his lips'²⁹) and for which no supernatural explanation is suggested, though the event, in both novels, has considerable symbolic resonance. Perhaps even the witch coven to which Kirstie thinks she belongs never really existed. This is certainly the feeling of her second husband William: 'He could not bear it, the witch-word, the coven, the thing that pulled at her, whether there had ever been such a thing or not!' (p. 162)

This interpretation may be strengthened by the fact that some at least of Kirstie's experiences seem to replicate Mitchison's own physical and psychological symptoms when in the throes of childhood terrors and the nightmares which continued throughout her life. Kirstie, for instance, reports after a nightmare 'a terrible sick feeling in the back of my head' (p. 162), just as Mitchison notes in her wartime diary: 'I feel sick this evening; I have a

²⁸ See Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: the witch-hunt in Scotland* (Chatto and Windus, 1981), particularly pp. 145-51.

²⁹ Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, p. 156. [*Cloud Howe* originally published 1933]

kind of pressure at the back of my head, the same I used to get as a child after frightening nightmares.' (AYTN, p. 59)

Kirstie sees 'appearances' (pp. 164, 404) which seem to be like the 'simulacra' seen by Mitchison. William's experiences during his sojourn with American Indians (which, pace the imperceptive 1947 reviewer quoted above, add up to much more than an 'excursion to the backwoods of America') may arise from the use of hallucinogenic substances or hypnotic chanting, sometimes used by Native American shamans.³⁰ They too resemble in many respects Mitchison's nursery terrors.

'There would be certain times when all of us ... would be cast into a deep sleep. We would wake to certain prepared horrors which we must disregard. It was not possible to disregard without worship. Excutor somno simulacraque noctis adoro.' (p. 286)

This is the very quotation from Ovid ('I am roused from sleep and beseech the phantoms of the night') which, as we have seen in chapter 1, Mitchison felt to be an exact evocation of her own 'appearances', 'the things that forced one to fear and worship'. By using it both here and in her memoir *Small Talk* (p. 61), she appears to be making a connection between Black William's experiences and her own.

Nevertheless, as Douglas Gifford says, there is 'a strange air of inconclusive mystery' in the accounts of witches in *The Bull Calves*.³¹ While this may be a direct reflection of Mitchison's own indecision as to the status of irrational events and experiences, our difficulty in reading Mitchison's position on witchcraft is mirrored by the wider difficulty which commentators have found, during the three hundred years since the period of the witch trials, in establishing the facts of these persecutions and the mindset which brought them about.

There are questions over what the witches were thought to have done (generally 'black magic' such as causing illness, though 'white magic' such as healing was at times deemed equally culpable), and how they were thought

³⁰ See Larry J. Zimmerman, *Native North America* (Duncan Baird Publishers, 1996), particularly pp. 92-9.

³¹ Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 236.

to have been able to do it (generally through the demonic pact; this belief enrolled the power of the established church against the hapless suspects). The underlying questions perhaps are why it was perceived necessary to attribute illness and misfortune to the agency of a particular individual or group, and, following on that, why certain individuals or groups were more likely than others to be suspected. One theory is that immediate suspects were usually women, usually of a lower class, and usually occupying a position outside the bounds of the settled community (for instance, a destitute widow). The relative importance of such factors is still a matter for debate.³²

Mitchison, however, appears, as mentioned in chapter 3, to have favoured Margaret Murray's influential, though now discredited, theory of witches as inheritors of a pagan fertility religion.³³ (To those who accept this theory it is logical that the established church would persecute the witches whom they saw as their rivals.) Kirstie's memories of the witch coven touch on such an idea (linking it with the power of women, a connection to which we shall return) and it is recognised by William from his experiences with the Indians.

'[T]imes I had a feeling that we were near to understanding in the heart of things that could have been turned to good, yet not good of a kind that would be recognized by the respectable and the members of the congregation. Least of all, maybe, by the men. That could be, could it no', William?'

'Aye,' he said, 'it could.' For he was thinking of rain makers and corn growers and healers ... (p. 166)

Mitchison in fact includes the Murray theory in her own overview, in the notes to *The Bull Calves*, of various possible explanations for 'witches'.

[O]nly some of the witches could have been psychic cases ... Some of them ... were certainly victims of compulsion neuroses, others may have been members of a kind of political secret society, others were simply healers or extra-sensitive persons trapped into the thing and often the victims of superstition and jealousy. There was also no doubt a direct connection with pre-Christian fertility religions. (p. 503)

³² See Larner, particularly chapter 8, pp. 89-102.

³³ See also Appendix I.

Perhaps we may infer from the supportive 'no doubt' that Mitchison, unlike critics of the Murray theory,³⁴ is inclined to assign it equal status with suggestions now more generally approved. She admits elsewhere in the notes, however, to uncertainty about the whole question.

I myself stand half-way between the two attitudes [i.e., belief and disbelief in the supernatural] in a state of suspended judgment that swings sometimes to one side and sometimes to the other, according to which I am arguing against. (p. 498)

In considering the motives behind the Crook of Devon trial she inclines to the rational view:

One asks oneself whether some stranger, possibly a wee bit queer himself, but wanting to go to bed with some woman, might have persuaded and frightened a poor thing here and there to accept him as Satan. Or was the whole thing made up by the women themselves? (p. 499)

Her level-headed and compassionate consideration of such a possibility may be contrasted with the rather more enthusiastic view of W.B. Yeats.

The English witch trials are like the popular poetry of England, matter-of-fact and unimaginative. ... But the Scotch trials are as wild and passionate as is the Scottish poetry ... There are orgies of lust and of hatred and there is a wild shamelessness that would be fine material for poets and romance writers if the world should come once more to half-believe the tale.³⁵

Kirstie, looking back in tranquillity at her own involvement with the witch coven, similarly admits: 'Yet now I am coming to think it wasna real at all, it was only an evil and unhappiness in myself' (p. 257), and surmises that the same may have been true of Christian Shaw. She suggests, in fact, what kind of unhappiness it was. Her perception is familiar enough to Mitchison's readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (though they may or may not agree with the underlying theory), but perhaps unexpected as expressed by an eighteenth-century woman.

'What made her so unhappy, then?' asked Catherine. ...

³⁴ See Appendix I.

³⁵ W.B. Yeats, 'Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-Lore', in *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. by Robert Welch (Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 364-73 (369).

'She hadna found a right man, poor Christian Shaw,' said Kirstie simply. (p. 257)

Echoing as it does Mitchison's own musings, quoted above, on the frequent confessions of witches that they had carnal dealings with Satan, this tends to reinforce the possibility that there is a definite purpose behind the inclusion of a witchcraft strand in *The Bull Calves*.

We may, indeed, already have realised that the witchcraft episodes, if not quite the digressions deplored by early reviewers, are not strictly necessary from the viewpoint of either the historian or the novelist. They are on the verge of being anachronistic. Historically, the Crook of Devon trials had taken place in 1662 and the Paisley trials in 1697, eighty-five and fifty years respectively before the action of the novel. The Scottish Witchcraft Act had been repealed in 1735, twelve years before.³⁶ Mitchison does suggest, plausibly enough, that such traumatic events would still be alive in folk memory (p. 173), but the period is late for witch panics in Scotland. For the purposes of the novel, therefore, Kirstie does not need to be involved in witchcraft.

The witchcraft strand of *The Bull Calves*, including Christian Shaw's fictitious deathbed scene and the whole matter of the introduction of the witchcraft-connected Shaw family into the otherwise impeccably sourced Haldane family tree, is part of Mitchison's intention, as was the construction of the witch suspect Green Jean in *We Have Been Warned*. In both cases, Mitchison is affirming the existence of a non-material cosmos, the source of a supernatural force which operates alongside, though not necessarily in co-operation with, material forces: a concept which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, is constant throughout her writing, and apparently in her life.

In the article already quoted, Douglas Gifford points out the recurrence in Mitchison's work of the image of the fairy hill, to be discussed in later chapters of this thesis. In particular reference to *The Bull Calves*, Gifford suggests that William's years with a tribe of American Indians equate

³⁶ Larner, p. 32.

to the traditional stay in the fairy hill of such ballad heroes as Thomas the Rhymer and Tam Lin.³⁷ Specifically, William lives with, and indeed marries, the Indian woman Ohnawiyo, whom at their first meeting he sees as

‘... a woman of the Sidhe, of the fairy people ... the same as the fairy woman that could have been watching among the birches of Knocknasidhe [the fairy hill] beyond Borlum ...’ (p. 275)

In conversation with Kirstie’s brother Patrick (an expounder, in the novel, of the rational point of view), William speaks haltingly of

‘... the disquieting shapes of one’s dreams, that must be made out of one’s own soul and that yet seem utterly separate from oneself ... they speak to a part of us. And that part may not be wholly bad. But of an underworld. Of the hills of the Sidhe. Of the dreams below sleep. Of the spirits of the wild woods.’ (p. 278)

He echoes this later in speaking of Kirstie’s possible involvement with witchcraft: ‘There is a deep part of ourselves that we canna rightly know.’ (p. 327) The reference is to the Jungian theories which greatly impressed Mitchison during the writing of *The Bull Calves*. (William’s awkward phrasing is symptomatic of an authorial dilemma here: Mitchison cannot allow him to be aware of twentieth-century schools of psychoanalysis, but she wants to include these ideas.) In a long note (pp. 511-17) she describes the importance of Jung’s animus/anima figures to the full development of her characters Kirstie and William and their relationship. She did not draw these characters from Jung, since she had already planned and partly written her book when she read his, but his theories seem to have chimed with and confirmed her authorial decisions.

A recent critic finds what Mitchison describes as ‘the Jungian basic plot of [the] book’ (p. 515) to be a complete explanation of the witchcraft strand.

This is the dynamic enacted in Kirstie Haldane’s struggle against the shadow side of her self, articulated in the text through the juxtaposition of Jungian archetypes. Kirstie embodies the absolute goodness of an archetypal mother figure, but through her bewitchment she reaches the very brink of her shadow-self. She has within her the potential to

³⁷ Gifford, ‘Forgiving the Past’, pp. 229-31.

become the opposing archetype – the destructive goddess or witch ... Here Mitchison shares the concerns of her friend Stevie Smith – everyone has a dark side, it is an integral part of the personality, and it is essential that we acknowledge it.³⁸

The ‘dark side’ does indeed permeate Stevie Smith’s work:

Deeply morbid deeply morbid was the girl who typed the letters
Always out of office hours running with her social betters
But when daylight and the darkness of the office closed about her
Not for this ah not for this her office colleagues came to doubt her
It was that look within her eye
Why did it always seem to say goodbye?³⁹

Mitchison also refers to the Jungian theory of archetypes when considering, in the notes to *The Bull Calves* (pp. 501-4), the experiences of nursery terrors such as she herself suffered in childhood. The child is liable to bargain for release from the nightly fears, not knowing the name of ‘the entity with whom the bargain is made’. Mitchison suggests that ‘it may be ... a very early matriarchal archetype, savage and implacable as the pre-Hellenic, pre-Edda, and long pre-Christians’ Gods were rumoured to be’. (p. 502) She goes on to point out that the pre-Christian fertility religions (from which, as we have noted, Margaret Murray derived witchcraft practices) ‘were often presided over by a destructive mother-goddess of the type we have considered’. (p. 503)

It would appear, again, that Mitchison is associating witchcraft with womanhood and with fertility rituals. Kirstie as witch is thus linked to Kirstie as woman, whether her experiences of witchcraft were real or imaginary. We remember her perception (p. 166) that women would best understand the ‘good’ side of witchcraft.

The theory has been noted that individuals, usually women, relegated to the margins of society because of poverty or some other perceived disadvantage, may have been the most likely to be suspected of witchcraft. Conversely, it has been suggested that witchcraft, or the fear of witchcraft,

³⁸ Plain, p. 163.

³⁹ Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems* (Penguin, 1983), pp. 296-8 (296).

conferred power on women who were otherwise relatively powerless, either because of their low social status or simply because they were women.⁴⁰ Mitchison embodies this theory in the minor yet significant character of the nursemaid Phemie Reid, whose influence remains with Kirstie 'from away back' as a residue of pre-Christian belief (pp. 84-5). When we first meet Phemie she is remembering these nursery days and it is clear that she enjoyed her power over the 'Gleneagles weans', in a higher social stratum than herself.

Wee Kirstie that was so awful bonny and cuddlesome, and all the more if you frightened her ... she'd bury her face in your apron and oh the curly wee pow and the strong and nice feel on yourself to be hurting and healing her, both at the once! (p. 321)

Though paying lip-service to ministers and hellfire sermons, Phemie believes all the local superstitions, viewing them in a much less complicated way than the enlightened Haldanes (or Mitchison).

As they passed by the crooked thorn she gave her petticoats a wee hitch and bobbed with her head, the lucky way of it ... Strathearn was full of appearances, grugous or over bonny, and the Terra Navi' housing as muckle Folk as Auchterarder and Blackford. And terrible beasties. The six-legged cattle that pastured under the Ochils. Things that could be set to follow you. And you never kenning ... Where there was any toom place for them, there they would come, and the trees and stones bent to their will and habitation. As could be easy seen. (pp. 321-2)

She brings this atmosphere of pagan belief into Gleneagles house, briefly tipping the balance of rationality so that Kirstie, in a panic, swings back into thoughts of witchcraft.

And a hope came at her that before next she was here ... Phemie might be under the earth. And with the hope, a will, an intention that it might be so, a pointing at Phemie, the thought of a waxen image – ach a wild wickedness, a naked sin! (p. 324)

She regresses momentarily into the belief that she did kill her husband, and into a memory of the seductive comfort of the coven where such thoughts and actions would be understood and accepted. She is rescued

⁴⁰ Larner, pp. 96-8.

by the appearance of William, who deals with Phemie from a great height: 'Mistress Reid, if, as I surmise, you are attempting to put the Sight on to me, you will get no satisfaction, because I walk under the Lord's hand and protection and have no fear' (p. 325). William has been seen at times as a believer, or half-believer, in the Sidhe and associated legends, but here he is a rational man and an orthodox Christian: no pagan female rites for him.

Most revealing is Phemie's musing as she leaves. She plans revenge on William and believes she can bring this about. She enjoys the thought, as she enjoyed her power over the Gleneagles children.

...she had her Friends, aye that she had, with power and dominion, and would stretch their hands over poor Phemie that was aye ready to do Their will. And maybe she would study on a way to get thon big black de'il of a Highlander across Their path. (p. 326)

But next minute she is thinking about cadging food, cast-off clothes or spare change from the house. Having now seen her clearly through William's eyes, and through Kirstie's when William is there, we know that she is in fact only a dirty old woman, 'gey shoogly about the hands and head' (p. 325). She turns to witchcraft, or the illusion of witchcraft, because there is no other way in which she could do anything to affect William or the house of Gleneagles, these figures of temporal 'power and dominion'.

Kirstie, at the time of her involvement with witchcraft, is also in a position of powerlessness, in a loveless marriage to a domineering and abusive husband. (It has been suggested that 'in situations of domestic stress and tension in which men resort to violence, women use witchcraft'.⁴¹) Some power is restored to Kirstie as she practises black magic (or believes that she does) against her first husband, feeling 'a kind of justification' for the practice as his anger and abuse continues (p. 164). The power she seeks, however, is, unlike Phemie's, not connected with social status, she was born to the gentry, and as a minister's wife she still has status in the community. Her need is personal and emotional: she is deeply unhappy. As we have seen, Mitchison allows her to recognise that it was probably her unhappiness which

⁴¹ Larner, p. 96.

predisposed her to thoughts of witchcraft. In her marriage to William she has found 'a right man' and feels no need for the power of witchcraft.

Indeed, Mitchison suggests that Kirstie now has that power, in its good aspect, within herself. The 'archetypal mother figure' seen in her by the critic quoted earlier can, as discussed in chapter 3, give either life or death. During her unhappy marriage, when she turned to the dark side, the life-giving aspect was suppressed: her two children died and she saw no prospect of having more (p. 95). Now she is fertile again, having had a child in her forties, and hopes for another (p. 384). At her new home in the Highlands, which is contrasted with the industrial towns where she spent her first marriage, she is taking an active part in making things grow (pp. 92-3). She is also 'mothering' her tenants, very much as Mitchison was trying to do in Carradale, something we shall explore further in chapter 5. (It has been mentioned that the people of Carradale were very much in Mitchison's mind during the writing of *The Bull Calves*.)

While the novel, with its careful structure and attention to historical detail, appears to operate on a rational plane, Mitchison is insisting here, as throughout her writing, on the reality of the irrational and its co-existence with the rational world. Kirstie's association with witches, whether her experiences are to be considered as actual occurrences or as psychological manifestations, constitute no mere digression but an essential element of *The Bull Calves*. If, as seems probable, Mitchison subscribes to the Murray theory of witchcraft as a continuation of pagan fertility rites, she can be seen, in both *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves*, to be acknowledging the female principle, which in its destructive aspect equates to the witch, but in its good aspect is fertility and life.

CHAPTER 5

Magic, children and class: *The Big House*

Fear of the Big House,
Shadow of all that has been,
Class hate worse than clan,
Hate of the Big House
Sundering woman from man.¹

While *The Bull Calves* is set in an area of Scotland well known to Mitchison during her childhood, *The Big House* (1950) is intimately connected with the village of Carradale in Kintyre, to which she moved as an adult in 1937. *The Big House* was published, and generally reviewed, as a children's fantasy novel, a label which at the time was sufficient to debar it from serious consideration as a work of literature. (This attitude largely survived, indeed, until the closing years of the twentieth century, when the work of writers such as Philip Pullman began to demand some revaluation.)

One reviewer recognised *The Big House* on publication as something more significant.

Mrs Mitchison has written a tragi-comedy expressing a profound apprehension of the tangled complexities of dark and light inherent in the human situation.²

The review, signed 'Robert Gordon', may probably be attributed to the poet and critic Alexander Scott (who came from Aberdeen, a city in which the name Robert Gordon has historical and cultural resonance).³ Under his own name Scott published in 1982 a warm and perceptive appreciation of

¹ From NM, 'The Cleansing of the Knife, 1941-1947', CK, pp. 39-72 (67).

² Robert Gordon, 'It's Magic', *Scots Review*, 11 (October 1950), 134.

³ Robert Gordon (1668-1731), a merchant and philanthropist born in Aberdeen, founded a school whose descendants are the Robert Gordon University and the private school Robert Gordon's College.

Mitchison's work which replicates the judgment and some of the phrases of the earlier review.⁴

Other reviewers also recognised a serious purpose behind the novel – though, as explained later, not all thought it appropriate in a children's book – and that purpose is clearly enough demonstrated in the text to indicate that Mitchison herself did not regard *The Big House* as purely and simply a fairy tale for children. It is in fact an examination of class relations in contemporary Scotland, and this is what prohibits its simple categorisation as a children's book, at least as the term was understood at the time of its publication.

Why did Mitchison frame her message in a form which gave scope for misinterpretation? The book may in part have been written for her first grandchild, whose name she gives to the ten-year-old central character, but such an explanation is probably too simplistic. Other possibilities will be examined here.

Considered as a children's book, *The Big House* in several ways follows a well-established tradition. Didactic intent has been present in children's fiction since the earliest days of the genre. Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839) is a lively story which nevertheless attempts to teach moral lessons. While this has a realistic contemporary setting and plot, fantasy novels such as Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) may also have a moral or didactic intention. Mitchison is following such precedents. Like earlier writers, she may have observed that children are able to accept 'magic', or unexplained incidents which seem magical to them, with a simplicity not available to adults, and through that acceptance are able to gain an understanding of the actual, non-magical world. In the specific case of *The Big House*, perhaps she has also recognised that the attitude taken by children to the social situation which is her main concern is not so ingrained as the attitude of adults, and that this flexibility can contribute to the resolution of

⁴ Alexander Scott, 'Naomi Mitchison: great grandmother', *Scottish Review*, 25 (February 1982), 15-19.

the problem about which – to judge from the ending of the novel – she wishes to express a cautious optimism.

Apart from the question of didactic intent, *The Big House* can be placed in a line of children's fantasy novels in which the young characters are first seen in their contemporary surroundings and are then transported, through the agency of magic, to other worlds, or to other places or times in their own world.

Specifically Scottish children's books in this genre are few. It is probably appropriate to include with them the Border ballads with their supernatural ambience, accessible in various forms to both adults and children, and known by Mitchison as a child and adolescent. She is likely also to have known J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (first performed 1904), whose status as a work for children is equally debatable.⁵

It has been noted that she knew and may have been influenced by George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858). Though the subtitle of that novel is 'A faerie romance for men and women', MacDonald's children's books, such as *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), are classics of the children's fantasy genre. Mitchison knew the *Fairy Books* and poetry of her friend Andrew Lang (*ST*, p. 51), and it is possible therefore that she was acquainted with his children's novel *The Gold of Fairnilee* (1888), which, as will be suggested in chapter 8, may have helped to form her ideas about the characteristics of fairies and fairy hills.

As the mother of young children she is likely to have kept in touch with children's fiction during her adult years. A contemporary reviewer of *The Big House* sees similarities to W.W.Tarn's *The Treasure of the Isle of Mist* (1920; reprinted 1950), a quest story set in Skye.⁶ Mitchison indicates in an interview that she knew Eric Linklater's children's books⁷: these are

⁵ See, among much recent criticism, Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the impossibility of children's fiction* (rev. ed. Macmillan, 1994), a psychological reading of *Peter Pan*.

⁶ unsigned review, *Scotland*, 46 (December 1950), 77. [Though the central characters in both books are a girl and a boy, careful reading finds little further resemblance.]

⁷ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p.80.

fantasy adventures, *The Wind on the Moon* (1944) and *The Pirates in the Deep Green Sea* (1949).

John Buchan's *The Magic Walking Stick* (1931) may also have been known to her.⁸ This slight tale, narrated neatly enough though in a heavily jocular style, is a mid-term adventure. The schoolboy Bill, on his way out to duck-shooting (a marked upper-class ambience pervades the story), mislays 'his own proper stick' and buys one from a strange little old man. It proves to be a wishing stick which will transport Bill anywhere in the world. A passing reference, not stressed and not returned to, establishes that the adventure starts on Hallowe'en, the magical date on which *The Big House* also begins.

In English, as distinct from Scottish, children's fiction, fantasy novels are numerous and the tradition well established. Mrs (Mary Louisa) Molesworth's *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877) and *The Tapestry Room* (1879) are early examples, and the line continues through John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk* (1927) and *The Box of Delights* (1935) to C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), with its sequels in the Narnia series, and the work of William Mayne, Alan Garner and Susan Cooper in the 1960s and 1970s, attaining more general recognition at the turn of the century with J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997 onwards) and Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000).

The storyline and imagery of *The Big House* follow the conventions of the genre, drawing specifically on folk traditions of the West of Scotland (though, like the Carradale manifestations surveyed in chapter 2, many are cognate with internationally distributed traditions and legends). The structure of the novel is unusual, since the action falls into two distinct though related sections of seven chapters each: there are effectively two separate adventures within *The Big House*.⁹ This is a deliberate move by Mitchison, relevant to the purpose of the book.

⁸ John Buchan, *The Magic Walking-Stick*, in *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales*, ed. by Gordon Jarvie (Penguin, 1992; Penguin Popular Classics, 1997), pp. 70-84. [Originally published 1931]

⁹ This is also the case in Eric Linklater's *The Wind on the Moon*.

A brief plot summary may help to clarify the question of structure. The first part of *The Big House* (chapters I-VII) begins on Hallowe'en. Su, the daughter of the Tigh Mòr or Big House in the Highland village of Port-na-Sgadan, and her friend Winkie, a fisherman's son, become involved with a piper who has been a prisoner for 'twice seventy years' in a fairy hill (p. 24). A prince of the Fair People – the fairies – is trying to get the piper back. In a demonstration of the spiteful power of fairyland, he steals Su's shadow (p. 29). To retrieve the shadow and free the piper, Su and Winkie, with the help of the Brounie, the supernatural guardian of the Big House, are transported back into the early nineteenth century, where Su is still a child of the Big House but Winkie a downtrodden tenant's son (pp. 36 ff). They enter the fairy hill, where Su recovers her shadow. Back in the real world, she undergoes an ordeal based on the ballad of Tam Lin (pp. 89-90) and saves the piper. He is restored to the present day in the shape of a baby, who is accepted and fostered by the Big House (pp. 91-8).

The second part (chapters VIII-XIV) takes place in the following summer, when Su, who has been away at school, returns to find that the Fair People are trying to get the baby back. They steal his soul and he becomes a changeling child (p. 104). Again with the Brounie's help, Su goes into the past to retrieve the soul, this time shape-shifting to become a swan (p. 109). She arrives as a swan maiden in 'the Dark Ages' (somewhere in the first millennium AD), finding Winkie there as a Celtic chieftain. They go together to the hill of Dunadd in Mid-Argyll, find the soul in the form of a golden hazelnut (p. 157), and return to the present day.

The dual structure, at first sight slightly awkward, is intentional and significant. Primarily, it provides a dual perspective on the past, since in the two different parts the social order is reversed: Winkie is a member of the underclass in part one and of the ruling class in part two. There is a less obvious reference, related to the fact that the first part begins on Halloween, and the second on an unspecified date in summer, when Su comes home from her English boarding-school for the summer holidays. Given the structure of the English school year, it seems possible that the second part of her

adventure begins at Lammas. The importance of Hallowe'en in Highland tradition, and in the plan of the book, will be discussed shortly. Lammas (1 August), however, was, like Hallowe'en (31 October), one of the traditional 'quarter days' of the Celtic year, with connotations which will be found relevant to Mitchison's intentions in writing *The Big House*.

While Mitchison is in general drawing on themes and conventions common in children's fantasy fiction, though adapting them to her own purpose, it is possible to see, here and there in *The Big House*, specific ideas which she may have come across in her childhood reading or in books available to her own children. The encounter with a soothsaying copper head in the fairy hill is reminiscent of a similar passage in John Masefield's *The Box of Delights*.¹⁰ Where Masefield's bronze head is a servant of the wizard Abner Brown and obliged to answer his questions, Mitchison's copper head is a gatekeeper with a question to test the children.

After a time they came to a copper head on a pillar alone on a marble floor, eyeless and shining. The head began to waggle its jaw at them. ... A clicking began inside the head and it said in a whirring voice, 'Stop, mortal strangers, and answer my riddles.' (pp. 73-4)

Winkie, child of the mid-twentieth century, thinks it is some kind of gramophone, and, though Su is not so sure, that perception gives them the confidence to answer its question: a reflection perhaps of Mitchison's own attempts to reconcile the irrational with her practical and scientific cast of mind.

The moment of transition or transformation, the move which takes the protagonist from the present-day and realistic world into another world, time or shape, is an important one in a children's fantasy novel. Mitchison's first such moment is effective in its simplicity. Su and Winkie are instructed to hold hands (so that what happens to one will happen to both, one of the laws of magic and fairy tale), and the Brounie makes use of the wag-at-the-wa', a pendulum clock; it is entirely appropriate in a Scottish kitchen, but there may be a memory here of the magic in Mrs Molesworth's *The Cuckoo Clock* (or of

¹⁰ John Masefield, *The Box of Delights* (Heinemann, 1935), pp. 246-50.

Mitchison's childhood feelings about clocks and other old-fashioned furniture, which we have noted in chapter 1).

'See yon wag-at-the wa'?' said the Brounie, pointing to the kitchen clock. 'When it gaes left ye'll gang, when it gaes right ye'll be back. Watch now!'

The pendulum of the clock wagged to the left. (p. 35)

And when Su opens her eyes she is in the past. The space between two ticks of the clock is a moment outside time, a liminal space; the importance of such spaces in encounters with fairyland will be considered later. It may be recalled that the magical nanny Mary Poppins, in one adventure, transports her charges to 'the Crack between the Old Year and the New', the space between the first and last strokes of midnight on New Year's Eve.

'Why doesn't the Spider frighten Miss Muffet?' [asks Michael]
'Because we are all in the Crack [explains Sleeping Beauty]. The Old Year dies on the First Stroke of Midnight and the New Year is born on the Last Stroke. And in between – while the other ten strokes are sounding – there lies the secret Crack. ... And inside the Crack all things are at one. ... This is the time and place, my darlings – the *only* time and the *only* place – where everybody lives happily ever after.'¹¹

The second transformation scene, when Su becomes a swan (p. 109), is most strongly linked with Mitchison's other treatments of the swan maiden folktale, to be discussed in chapter 8, but also echoes to some extent Kay's transformations into a stag, a wild duck and a fish in *The Box of Delights*,¹² and The Wart's transformations into a fish and a merlin in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*.

The Wart found it difficult to be a new kind of creature. ... He did not know how to swim like a fish. ... He was not sure which were his sides and which were his back and front ... He did jack-knives as the tench directed and found that he was swimming vertically downward into the mud.¹³

¹¹ P.L. Travers, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (Peter Davies, 1944), pp. 155-6.

¹² Masefield, pp. 84-6.

¹³ T.H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* [originally published 1939] in his *The Once and Future King* (Collins, 1958). See pp. 41-8 (41-2) and pp. 72-81 for the fish and merlin transformations respectively.

It may be noted that, in contrast, the Su swan is an accomplished flier from the beginning, though, as swans do, she has a little trouble with landing (pp. 110-13).

The Big House may perhaps, however, be seen as particularly indebted to the novels of E. Nesbit (1858-1924). In fact the young heroine knows these and recognises them as offering guidelines for her own adventure: “‘It’s all right, Winkie’, said Su, remembering *The Amulet* and *Harding’s Luck*. ‘It doesn’t take any of time now.’” (p. 33)

It has been mentioned in chapter 3 that Nesbit, like Mitchison, was plagued by terrors and nightmares as a child. Coincidentally, her biography in later years has certain other similarities to Mitchison’s (for instance, she kept open house for artists, writers, politicians, waifs and strays, and she and her husband both took lovers within their marriage).¹⁴ Like Mitchison she was a socialist, a member of the Fabian Society, and socialist beliefs found their way into her books for children, something which Mitchison as an adult recognised.

... I read a few children’s books like *Holiday House*, which had ‘morals’, as indeed the Nesbits have, though less obviously, and as most books written by socially conscious authors for whatever age group must have. (ST, p. 71)

Nesbit published, as part of a much larger writing output, twelve novels and a number of short stories for children, some of them realistic family stories and some fantasies. The classic Nesbit novels are probably those which appeared between 1899 (*The Story of the Treasure Seekers*) and 1909 (*Harding’s Luck*), and they quickly became part of the young Naomi Haldane’s imaginative world.

The Nesbits were beginning to come out and one looked forward passionately to the next. There was one at least every two years ... At this stage I began deliberately identifying, with Alice among the Wouldbegoods and with Anthea in the other family, though I was perhaps more Jane-like. (ST, p. 69)

¹⁴ Briggs, *passim*.

While ‘the Wouldbegoods’, the Bastables, appear in a series of humorous realistic novels, ‘the other family’, introduced in *Five Children and It* (1902), acquires a characterful, grumpy and frequently uncooperative supernatural helper, a sand-fairy or Psammead.

The critic Alison Lurie considers Nesbit to have a pivotal place in the history of children’s literature.

[I]t is possible now to speak of juvenile literature as before and after E. Nesbit ... [She] was the first to write for children as intellectual equals and in their own language. Her books were startlingly innovative in other ways: they took place in contemporary England and recommended socialist solutions to its problems; they presented a modern view of childhood; and they used magic both as a comic device and as a serious metaphor for the power of the imagination. Every writer of children’s fantasy since Nesbit’s time is indebted to her – and so are some authors of adult fiction.¹⁵

Mitchison may well be one of these authors. The influence of Nesbit on *The Big House* may be seen particularly in the use of time travel, a recognised convention of children’s fantasy fiction, to convey, like Nesbit, a socialist message.

That message was recognised, as mentioned earlier, by some contemporary reviewers, one of whom at least disapproved.

Naomi Mitchison has all the equipment of a storyteller in the Celtic vein ... and she is obviously steeped in the fairy lore of old Scotland. ... But in the opinion of this reviewer, a fairy story is not a vehicle for the introduction of class consciousness ... These things are learned with sadness and all too soon when history is studied seriously, and there is surely no place for them in the golden land of fairy-tale.¹⁶

The Scottish socialist periodical *Forward*, on the other hand, both recognised and strongly supported Mitchison’s intention.

... This is the story of the ‘thing’ – disturbing, violent, hardly half comprehended – that kept interfering in the friendship of Su and Winkie ... the class barrier that lies between them ... Not the least of the effects of the Hallowe’en magic is to take Su and Winkie and show them how this ‘thing’ is something beyond their own wills and desires that has grown out of a long history ... [NM] feels the old legends and gets

¹⁵ Alison Lurie, *Don’t Tell the Grown-Ups* (Bloomsbury, 1990), pp. 99-117 (99-100).

¹⁶ unsigned review, *Scotland’s SMT Magazine*, 46 (December 1950), 65-6.

inside their patterns, she feels the pain of what separates the children, and feels (and this is of equal importance with knowing) the long processes of human development that lie behind today's hates and prejudices ... [This is] good history illuminated with great wisdom.¹⁷

The equally sympathetic and perceptive review by 'Robert Gordon', already quoted, accepts the message as integral to the novel, calling *The Big House*

... a book in which the natural magic of childhood, the terrible charm of the supernatural, the dark power of history, and a vision of life as at once dreadful and sublime – a sense of 'the heartbreak at the heart of things' wedded to a realisation of sometimes overwhelming loveliness – are all woven together in a pattern which, like a tartan with a dark ground behind its chequer-board of brighter colours, suggests both grimness and gaiety.¹⁸

The motive behind the book is signalled by its title. Where Lang's and Tarn's titles focus on the gold or treasure to be found by the young adventurers, Mitchison's title immediately foregrounds 'the Big House' (and, implicitly, its occupants), indicating her overall intention. The relationship between the Tigh Mòr and the village, and how it came to reach, by the mid-twentieth century, a situation of mutual unease, is the theme of *The Big House*.

Su, as mentioned earlier, recognises her adventure as similar to that in Nesbit's *Harding's Luck*. In this 1909 novel, a sequel to *The House of Arden* (1908), the action moves between the contemporary period, when Dickie Harding is a lame orphan living in a slum, and the seventeenth century, when he is the son and heir of the house of Arden. In the contemporary world he is eventually recognised as Lord Arden, but decides to return to the earlier period, partly because he feels it wrong to displace his cousins, the present-day heirs before his reinstatement.

The Big House has certain thematic similarities to *Harding's Luck*, notably in its presentation of a character whose social position is 'high' in one

¹⁷ GMT [George Morgan Thomson], 'Karl Marx in Fairyland', *Forward*, 44 (30 September 1950), 2.

¹⁸ Gordon, 134.

era and 'low' in another. There is one major difference, however, which marks it out as particular to Mitchison. In Nesbit's view – at least as personified in her characters – the position of Lord Arden, though it involves duties and responsibilities, appears to be one to be desired, and the prevailing feudal system, which assigns a distinct place and role in society to lord and commoner alike, is satisfactory and right, provided that the lord treats the commoner well. Mitchison is by no means so sure that this is the case.

Mitchison had espoused egalitarian ideals for some time, and had addressed questions of class in her writing, for instance in *We Have Been Warned*. She was required to confront the feudal system in personal terms when she and her husband bought Carradale House in Kintyre, the 'big house' of a West Highland estate, in 1937. It was intended as a holiday house – the family home in London and her husband's legal practice there were retained – but on the outbreak of World War II in 1939, travel between Carradale and London, a long haul in any circumstances, became much more difficult, and Mitchison found herself a year-round resident in Carradale (*YMWA*, pp.216-21). As such, she also found herself inescapably in the position of 'the laird'.

I was still rather reluctant about the whole thing. I felt I would get into Aunt Bay's position [at Cloan], pulled into everything. ... When two of the fishermen ... came cautiously over to see what they could get out of us ... I gave them sprigs of scented lily-flowered rhododendron and also a somewhat different approach to the one they had been used to from the Tigh Mor [sic], the big house. (*YMWA*, p. 218)

The 'approach ... they had been used to' was a strictly feudal one.

... Denny M ... telling me about his childhood in one of the condemned cottages at Airds, eight people in a but-and-ben, with loft, short of food and afraid of being put out if they took a rabbit: how he'd come up to the Big House once to ask for another cottage, but hadn't got it ... (*AYTN*, p. 45)

Mitchison worked hard to bring about a more egalitarian and friendlier relationship between the Big House and the village, and felt at times that she was succeeding. When out poaching with villagers, for instance,

I began to feel a lovely sense of acceptance ... one got the sense of this other world going on alongside the laird's world and far more real ... this conscious happiness was on me, this trust. (*AYTN*, p. 156)

At other times she was keenly aware of the disadvantages of her position.

Living in a village is walking
Among snare-wire, being
The bulge-eyed rabbit, ware of
The light heart, dancing gossip-stoats, the blood-lipped,
Biding their time.
Living in the Big House is being
The big stag, the twelve-pointer,
Watched on, edible, spied and lied to,
From burrows, runways, witch-twisted bushes, and most
From the hoodies' rock where the observant, the cautious, the hungry
hoodies
Feed upon small game still, hoping for bigger,
And bide their time.¹⁹

Some fifty years later she is able to sum up the situation in a comment which reads sadly against her enthusiastic accounts of the early years:

I could never allow myself to understand how much of a gap there really was between myself and them, yes, all of them. I loved Carradale, but not in the way the people of Carradale wanted or – most of them – understood.²⁰

The Big House is a product of Mitchison's earlier and more optimistic period in Carradale. She had already written about the problem some five years into her residence there.

The Big House has seldom been genuinely neighbourly. It has been in a different layer of culture, centred, as often as not, on London. And – it has had that money to spare which its neighbours didn't have. Things are different now, and the folk in the Big House have come to understand that, not everywhere, but wherever they have any roots, native or acquired. Yet, to be neighbourly, they have to overcome the fear and distrust of two hundred years.²¹

¹⁹ NM, 'Living in a Village', *CK*, pp. 26-7. First published *Scots Magazine*, 39 (June 1943) 199.

²⁰ NM, 'Living Around with Neil', *Neil Gunn's Country*, ed. by Dairmid Gunn and Isobel Murray (Chambers, 1991), pp. 115-37 (129).

²¹ NM, 'What to do with the Big House', *SMT Magazine*, 31 (February 1943), 30-4 (p. 33).

Even as she sets out a utopian dream for the future of Carradale, she knows that 'there are immense hangovers, plenty of people who will never be friends, who will never feel at ease here, nor want to come' and she is painfully aware why this may be so. Her understanding of the reason is made clear in an entry in her diary for 1941 and in a poem resulting from the experience recorded there.

In May 1941 she is making the long walk from Carradale to Largie, across the peninsula of Kintyre, through rough moorland country, by then uninhabited but once occupied (if sparsely) by crofters and shepherds.

Here and there were houses; the road ended at a ruined steading, with bracken over the garden patch; I went into the house and asked the people who might have been there to forgive us. (*AYTN*, p. 148)

'The people who might have been there' is an ambiguous phrase, perhaps intentionally so. It may signal merely an intellectual acceptance of the injustices and evictions carried out by the lairds, as she speaks to the long-dead people who might have been there as tenants in the old houses. Alternatively, in the type of emotional identification which (as we have seen in chapter 1) she sometimes experienced, she may be indicating her sense that the people might be *there*, near her, in 1941. Sorley MacLean's great poem of the Clearances, 'Hallaig', acknowledges such a view:

They are still in Hallaig,
MacLeans and MacLeods,
all who were there in the time of MacGille Chaluim
the dead have been seen alive.²²

On the walk back, Mitchison is undoubtedly aware of the 'spirit of place'.

I saw the red bruachs above allt Narrachan [Narrachan Burn] a long way off, and found them frightening, a length of red earth precipice close over the river where I must ford it, by the deserted village of Narrachan ... going up to the old empty house again, my legs were trembling with tiredness and my heart hammering ... But then I was on the old road again and the loneliness dropped behind me, and the terrible feeling of the clearances, and the hate I had on the sheep. (*AYTN*, p. 150)

²² Sorley MacLean, 'Hallaig', *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge* (Vintage, 1991), pp. 226-31 (229).

The poem 'Ghosts at Narrachan' was published the following year.

People of the houses,
Whose road is crawling with bracken,
Sheep are over your garden
And where the road was.
You took the road going down, but never,
Never the road back.
The sheep stare and gather:
They were your enemies.
But what was behind the sheep?
People of the houses, forgive me,
Forgive the sins of my fathers;
They have been visited on me, too.
Oh people of the houses,
Let our children be friends!²³

'Let our children be friends' is the premise of *The Big House*.

The West Highland village of Port-na-Sgadan, which is the setting of *The Big House*, is recognisably Carradale. (Port-na-Sgadan, port of the herring, a suitable generic name for a fishing village, was used again by Mitchison in her play about the fishing, *Spindrift* (1951), but is also the name of a township just south of Carradale.) The book is written in what we may call a 'Carradale voice' which Mitchison, once settled there and beginning to write more frequently on Scottish themes, adopted for much of her fiction and poetry. The local accent greatly appealed to her.

The soft voices of those who came exploring to see what the new owners were like had a very soothing quality. I fell collectively in love ... (SSP, pp. 2-3)

Eager to empathise with Carradale people, to become herself a part of Carradale and not a remote laird in the Big House, she may have recognised the 'soft voices' as an inheritance from the Gaelic-speaking past which she wanted to acknowledge and for the injustices of which she wanted to atone. This is the voice she soon began to use in her Scottish writing. In some of her

²³ NM, 'Ghosts at Narrachan', *Scots Magazine*, 37 (1942), 465.

later stories, arguably, the style is more forced and its mannerisms more obtrusive: this, with the questions of its use in the Central Highlands setting of *The Bull Calves* and of Mitchison's writing voice in general, will be discussed fully in chapter 7.

In *The Big House*, however, the Carradale voice attains a natural ease of expression and suits the book well. In addition, the narration opens – also suitably – in the voice of a child out guising on Hallowe'en.

Port-na-Sgadan is kind of scattered, and before you had worked your way through from the shore to the glen, it would be late on, and you might have bumped yourself and stubbed your toes plenty stumbling about in the dark behind your false-face. (p. 9)

The subsequent description of the guisers (pp. 11-14) is very close to Mitchison's diary entry describing Hallowe'en 1939 in Carradale (*AYTN*, pp. 51-4), confirming the identification of Port-na-Sgadan with Carradale.

That identification, together with the theme of class relationships which chimes so closely with Mitchison's own concerns about her place in Carradale, suggests examination of the two central characters, Su, daughter of the Tigh Mòr, and Winkie, a fisherman's son. (His name is actually Willie; his nickname is a fishing term for the guide-light used in ring-netting.) Given that Port-na-Sgadan is effectively Carradale (and the Tigh Mòr is largely recognisable as Carradale House), the fictional characters Su and Winkie may be seen to personify the children envisaged by Mitchison in the poem 'Ghosts at Narrachan': 'Let our children be friends'.

The character Su is worth particular consideration. She appears to be named for Mitchison's first grandchild, born in 1942, Petronella Susan, known as Su (*AYTN*, pp. 221, 348). This child, however, did not live in Carradale nor occupy the position of 'daughter of the Big House' held by the fictional Su. There is probably some reference to the childhood of Mitchison's daughter Val, who was nine years old when the family moved to Carradale, and who, like the fictional Su, attended the village school for a time before going to boarding school in the south (see *AYTN*, *passim*).

There is another possibility. Mitchison's youngest child, a daughter, was born in July 1940 but lived only a few hours. Had she survived, she would therefore have been a little over ten at the time *The Big House* was published, late in 1950 (though its present-day action takes place a few years earlier).

In her moving poem on the birth and death of her daughter, 'Clemency Ealasaid' (BC, pp. 11-15), Mitchison muses (line 67): 'This was to have been a binding between me and Carradale', and the same thought is found in her diary of the time (AYTN, p. 73). That is exactly the role proposed for 'our children' in 'Ghosts at Narrachan', and carried through by Su, 'little more than ten years old' (p. 9) in *The Big House*. When Mitchison took part in the Hallowe'en guising described in *Among You Taking Notes* which so closely parallels the episode in *The Big House*, she must already have been pregnant with Clemency Ealasaid. It is possible to surmise that as she planned and wrote *The Big House*, the role which she had envisaged for Clemency Ealasaid was in her thoughts.

A further small point may support this possibility: the dedication to *The Big House*, 'Mostly for Murdoch'. Mitchison's diary entry for 23 August 1940, shortly after the death of her baby, indicates that Murdoch, her second son, was a sympathetic presence at that difficult time.

Talked to Murdoch about my own problems. He is a queer, dispassionate and I think really scientific-minded creature; I was pretty sure that my images wouldn't hurt him ... I could talk to him about this baby and the possibility of another, and told him I couldn't tackle Dick. At which he went off and apparently did so ... (AYTN, p. 86)

The dedication may acknowledge her gratitude for Murdoch's understanding, and, implicitly, the close connection between *The Big House* and her complex feelings about Clemency Ealasaid and Carradale.

Another identification of Su and Winkie may, however, tentatively be made, not replacing their role as representatives of the hoped-for future of Carradale, but rather lying behind it. In the present day, friendship between

them is inhibited by an awkwardness arising (as they both know) from the feudal relationships of the past.

[Su] was from the Big House, and in times past the Big House ones had been hard and cruel to the fathers and grandfathers of the ones at the school, and kept them in fear and, maybe, put them out of their houses ... (p. 10)

In the distant past, however, it is Winkie who belongs to the ruling class. By the end of the book the message has been delivered that social position, far from being fixed or ordained, can vary over the years, and that, in relationships of friendship or love, it is unimportant. This is a view which Mitchison held in relation to her friends among the Carradale fishermen, as her diary reveals.

If I 'covet' X or Y or Z here at Carradale, as indeed I do, it's not because I want to own them or to get anything out of them or to exploit them or their families in any way; I just simply like them ... I want, as it were, not just a slip, not a tease, but the whole thing. Yet I know that if I were to take it, it would be misinterpreted, probably by them, certainly by anyone connected with them. (*AYTN*, p. 181)

The character Winkie represents the village of Carradale, but particularly the fishing community. His transmutation into a chieftain correlates to Mitchison's perception of the essential nobility of her fishermen friends. Several of them acted in a play which she produced for the village in the early years of her residence there. She notes, deploring the technical necessity for stage make-up, their 'rope-scarred hands and sea-and-wind-beaten faces. But there was a strength and nobility there which needed no disguising'.²⁴

Even earlier, her close friend Denis Macintosh appears, unnamed, in her poem 'The Alban Goes Out: 1939': 'I have seen you kilted and fine/ Like a laird and all at the Mod ...'²⁵ Possibly the relationship between Su and Winkie, with its occasional coolnesses and misunderstandings but its essential

²⁴ NM, 'Village Play-Making', p. 23.

²⁵ NM, 'The Alban Goes Out: 1939', CK, pp. 1-11 (9). See also *AYTN*, passim.

stability, reflects, in an idealised form, that between Mitchison and the fishermen, particularly perhaps Denis Macintosh.

Having chosen to pursue her theme through the medium of a fairy tale, Mitchison selects the magical elements of her story with care. She starts with the perception noted earlier that Carradale is a suitable location for 'fairies and so on' (*AYTN*, p. 236). In addition she had found there a rich local deposit of myth, legend and superstition. She enlarges on the topic in an interview given as late as 1989.

Very odd things happen here. There's a bit of forest that was planted, but not, apparently, by any of the foresters, because nobody claimed it [i.e., claimed subsidy for it]. ... That part of the forest had been planted by somebody who, I think, believed in fairies, or whatever you call them.²⁶

While, as previously noted, the magical elements in *The Big House* are motifs known in Kintyre folktales, in Scottish folklore generally, and in an international context – the replacement of a baby by a changeling, for instance, is a commonplace in folklore,²⁷ and the golden hazelnut, the form in which the baby's soul is eventually found, is reminiscent of the Celtic hazelnuts of wisdom²⁸ – they can be seen to have something in common. Mitchison has selected them as being directly relevant to her theme. In line with her wish to demonstrate the essential unimportance of class in relationships, she is considering the idea of a common ancestry.

Su and Winkie are in fact related by blood, though the relationship has been forgotten in the present day.

'Yon laddie is far oot kin o' yours on the mother's side ... In this time his name is the same as your ain.' (*BH*, p. 49)

As noted, Donald MacLean in *We Have Been Warned* is 'a sort of a dim cousin' (on the mother's side) to Dione Galton (*WHBW*, p. 208). Much later, in her 1987 novel *Early in Orcadia*, Mitchison makes as narrator the

²⁶ Interview with Thompson, *Taliesin's Successors*.

²⁷ See Henderson and Cowan, pp. 96-100.

²⁸ See Darwin, pp. 98-9.

considered statement: 'Go far enough back and all humankind are cousins'.²⁹ Who, in that case, she is asking in *The Big House*, has a right to sovereignty or power?

It is therefore significant that four major elements in *The Big House* all relate to the theme of ancestry: Hallowe'en, the tinkers, the Brounie, and the fairy hill.

1. Hallowe'en

Hallowe'en is to Su and Winkie – long before the much more recent introduction of the American custom of 'trick or treat' – an excuse for dressing up and engaging in a little mild anarchy (pp. 9-12). The same applied in Carradale during Mitchison's early years there.

Angus ... seized me round the middle and proceeded to tickle ... Then to Alec's, where we had a good roughhouse ... in the rough and tumble Anna spotted a ring, so that set Alec off and he began to pull my dress off ... we met another gang of maskers, and exchanged pinches and hugs ... in the scuffle we got away. (*AYTN*, pp. 52-3)

But something other than fun is implicit in Hallowe'en celebrations. Mitchison indicates this through her narrator in *The Big House*, as the dressing-up and horseplay modulate into a fear of something unknown.

It is this way it always is at Hallowe'en. You can never be sure if someone you meet is themselves ... It was the same for Su and Winkie, and they could not be sure whether this was the piper or who it was ... And the moonlight shifted on him, and they were both frightened, suddenly and hard, and right down to their hearts. (p. 11)

Traditionally, Hallowe'en, or Samhain, marked the end of the Celtic year (or the beginning, since the year, tied in to the rhythms of nature, was viewed as cyclical). The four 'quarter days', Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane and Lammas, celebrated on the first day of November, February, May and August respectively, were days of great significance, to which many superstitions and observances accrued.³⁰ The quarter days were liminal times, situated on the

²⁹ NM, *Early in Orcadia* (Richard Drew, 1987), p. 6.

³⁰ See F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, I (Glasgow: William Maclellan, 1957), pp. 54-6.

threshold or boundary between seasons (in the case of Hallowe'en, between years) and therefore also between worlds, like the moment between two ticks of the clock.

Any discussion of supranormal creatures, metaphysical experiences or supernatural landscapes is almost impossible without some grasp of the fundamental role boundaries play; they exist at the junctures between the world of the natural and the supernatural.³¹

At Hallowe'en in particular the boundary between the real world and the fairy world dissolved and the threshold could be crossed. Fairies were commonly seen on Hallowe'en, and a mortal, provided he approached in the prescribed way, could enter a fairy hill.³² Most relevant to *The Big House* is the associated belief that only at Hallowe'en could a mortal hope to escape from imprisonment in the fairy hill. The eponymous hero of the ballad 'Tam Lin' knows this, appealing to his lover Janet to provide the necessary help from the mortal world:

But the night is Hallowe'en, lady,
The morn is Hallowday;
Then win me, win me, an ye will,
For weel I wat ye may.³³

The piper who appears in front of Su and Winkie on Hallowe'en is in the same situation, and Mitchison draws directly on the ballad, casting Su in the Janet role. As Tam Lin is transformed into a series of fearsome creatures and objects,³⁴ Donald the piper becomes in succession a snake, a slater (or woodlouse), a wild deer, a white-hot bar of iron, and a naked baby. Su, like Janet, holds on through all the changes until 'everything was quiet. And the Prince [of the fairies] was gone' (pp. 89-90).

The threshold which can be crossed at Hallowe'en, however, is not only that of fairyland. It is a festival of death, as James Joyce recognises in the short story 'Clay'. During one of the traditional fortune-telling games

³¹ Henderson and Cowan, p. 43; discussion follows, pp. 43-4..

³² See M.M. Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*, III (Folk-Lore Society, 1941), pp. 164-7.

³³ Lyle, p. 129.

proper to Hallowe'en, in which blindfolded players choose among saucers containing such symbols of the future as a ring or a prayer-book, a practical joke is played which, in spite of the party atmosphere, makes the company uneasy:

She moved her hand about here and there in the air and descended on one of the saucers. She felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls and told her to throw it out at once: that was no play.³⁵

As we realise from the title of the story – it is not otherwise specified – the next-door girl has brought in some earth from the garden – clay – which would foretell death. Joyce is tapping into the darkness behind Hallowe'en.

Mitchison is strongly aware of the connection with death, and of the belief that the dead can revisit the places and people they knew in life (still remembered in the ghosts and skulls of today's Hallowe'en festivities), even as she takes part in the rough and tumble of a Carradale Hallowe'en.

[False faces] are almost always *white* with a few dabs of colour, and this whiteness has a curiously ghostly effect. Added to this there is a good deal of exchanging of clothes between the sexes, so that it is very much of an *apaturia*: we *are* the returning ghosts. (*AYTN*, p. 52)

Mitchison's association of *apaturia* with ghosts is not entirely clear. The *Apaturia* was an Athenian festival concerned with initiation into *phratriai*, organised brotherhoods.³⁶ Though this chimes with Mitchison's idealisation of family and clan ties and her belief that 'all humankind are cousins', there may be some confusion here with the Lemuria or Lemuralia, a Roman festival involving rites to appease the malevolent ghosts of the dead. It has been suggested that All Saints' Day, 1 November, is a Christianisation of this

³⁴ Lyle, p. 130. Forms vary in different versions of the ballad and NM uses a slightly different series.

³⁵ James Joyce, 'Clay', *Dubliners* (Paladin, 1988), pp. 110-18 (117). [Originally published 1914]

³⁶ H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp.88-92.

festival; Hallowe'en is the eve of All Saints.³⁷ Mitchison expands on the idea in the 1989 interview already quoted:

This [the dead rising] is what Hallowe'en is all about, and up until quite lately we took it half seriously. When we went about guising, we were the dead. All this part about wearing masks, and so on, wasn't just for fun.³⁸

A striking scene in Mitchison's Arthurian novel *To the Chapel Perilous* dramatises the belief. The reporters Lienors and Dalyn are attending midnight mass on Hallowe'en.

Then they heard a little scraping noise at the outer door and turned. In came all the ghosts. They came forward greyly and stood close packed in the church since they were the dead of many years and more in number than the living. ... Then they saw that ghosts had come to those others who were in the church with them, a young woman wearing the bridal veil she had been buried in to the young man, a wounded son to the old man, two little children to the young couple. ... Galahad, the priest, ... held [the Grail] up over the ghosts and spoke to them in the words of the Mass. ... And then, steadily and gently, and more quickly every minute, the ghosts came up to the steps of the altar ... And in a short while there were no more ghosts, only the church empty and the weeping of the mourning folk. (*TCP*, pp. 122-3)

So the dead, the ancestors of present-day Carradale, 'the people who might have been there' (in both the possible senses noted earlier in connection with 'Ghosts at Narrachan'), are present from the start in *The Big House*.

If the opening of part two takes place at Lammas, however, it seems that Mitchison is providing a counterbalance. Lammas, or Lughnasa, was the Celtic festival of harvest, and was marked, particularly in Ireland and to some extent in Scotland, by bonfires, fairs and dancing.³⁹ These customs continued well into the twentieth century. Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) is set in the summer of 1936, when the village of Ballybeg is 'off its head' because of the forthcoming harvest dance. The five unmarried sisters in

³⁷ Recent scholarship, particularly Roman Catholic, tends to disagree. See <http://encyclopedia.worldvillage.com>

³⁸ Interview with Thompson, *Taliesin's Successors*.

the narrator's family catch the infection, dancing like 'shrieking strangers' to Irish dance music on the radio.

AGNES: I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five and I want to dance.⁴⁰

Kate, the oldest sister, condemns the 'pagan ... devilish' rites of Lughnasa, which are still observed by the villagers, but nevertheless dances on her own, 'simultaneously controlled and frantic'.

Implicit in both the celebration and the disapproval is the knowledge that Lughnasa is a celebration of fertility; a festival of life, as Hallowe'en is a festival of death. The Lammas fairs were, within living memory, the scene of courtship and matchmaking, sometimes including the settling of marriage contracts.⁴¹ In part one of *The Big House* Mitchison is acknowledging the ancestors of Su and Winkie; in part two she is suggesting that the line will continue, projecting the development of their friendship into the classless relationship which was her ideal.

2. The tinkers

Meanwhile she adds to the characters in *The Big House* another group of people whose contemporary presence is a link with the past. These are the tinkers, or travellers as they now prefer to be called, since 'tinker' has declined from its original honourable connotation of 'metalworker' to become, as used by non-travellers, a term of abuse.⁴² They are still to be found in parts of Scotland and were regular travellers on the roads of Kintyre until the closing decades of the twentieth century. Mitchison took a keen interest in this distinctive social group, and, here and elsewhere⁴³, utilises the idea that the tinkers have links with 'the other world'. Their unconventional lifestyle and status as outsiders make them, in her eyes, as 'other' as the

³⁹ See Maire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁴⁰ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 13.

⁴¹ See MacNeill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, passim.

⁴² See NM's short story 'A Matter of Behaviour', *A Girl Must Live* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1990), pp. 109-15. Hereafter *AGML*.

⁴³ For instance in the short story 'What do you think yourself?', *What do you think yourself?* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1982), pp. 62-8. Hereafter *WDYTY*.

denizens of the fairy hill, a connection expressed by the traveller storyteller Duncan Williamson:

The Broonie, the silkies, and the fairies ... [are] part of an Other World for travellers that they love. Because the people of this Other World have the freedom, have the power, they are immune from persecution by the local public and can't be disturbed.⁴⁴

In *The Big House*, the young tinker Ian Townsley (a surname commonly found among Kintyre travellers) plays a magic tune which is a defence against the fairies (pp. 21, 28), while his sister Dina turns up in different periods of time throughout the novel, sensitive to the fairy world to the extent that she can provide Su with information and warnings. When Su and Winkie meet the king of the fairies, they find that he has 'bright wavy orange-fair hair, like a tinker' (p. 74). (Marina Warner has noted that 'red hair [is] a fairy characteristic, inherited from the demons of Christian superstition'.⁴⁵)

'He looks like the king of the tinkers,' whispered Su.

'He's no tink, yon!' said Winkie. 'How can you say that, Su?' ...

But Su was puzzling away at it, and wondering in her mind if maybe there was some relationship between the tinkers and the fair people, although it might have been forgotten in the years between. (p. 75).

While these attributes belong to the fairy-tale aspect of *The Big House*, the underlying significance of the tinker characters is that they are a further demonstration of how social status can change. In the Dark Ages, when Winkie is a chieftain, they have a recognised and respected place in society as nomadic craftsmen.

'The tinklers at their work,' said Winkie, 'but it is best not to be asking overmuch. ... They are different from ourselves. They know all the red earths and how to work with them, and they are hither and thon, not settled in houses nor under any chief ... ' (p. 146)

In modern times, as Mitchison recognises, tinkers or travellers are outsiders. That there has been a decline in their status is agreed, even though

⁴⁴ Duncan Williamson, *The Broonie, Silkies and Fairies* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993), p. xix.

⁴⁵ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (Vintage, 1995), p. 253.

their origins are unclear. Of romantic legends that they descend from royalty or Jacobite fugitives, one historian says:

Most of these stories are clearly fanciful ... but they cannot be dismissed entirely because the inbreeding traditional to the group does reinforce ancestral connectedness.⁴⁶

He suggests two group-origins which may be more likely: descent from Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers displaced by Neolithic agriculturalists, or descent from 'a caste of Bronze Age metalworkers'. Whatever the truth, he maintains, 'here is a group whose social forms have direct links with the pre-historic period and, perhaps, the Palaeolithic period'. As such, they are clearly associated, in *The Big House*, with the theme of ancestral connections and changing status over the years.

3. The Brounie

The Brounie in *The Big House* represents a type of fairy, or familiar spirit, found in legends all over Scotland. A brownie's function is to help around the house, this being, of course, the rationale behind the choice of the name for junior Girl Guides.⁴⁷ He will happily carry out great amounts of work, unless the householder insults him by the gift of new clothes, when he will take offence and disappear.⁴⁸ In *The Big House* he is the main supernatural agent supporting Su and Winkie, and, like E. Nesbit's Psammead or Mrs Molesworth's Cuckoo, he may carry out the role identified by Bruno Bettelheim:

[A] child, as long as he is not sure his immediate human environment will protect him, needs to believe that superior powers, such as a guardian angel, watch over him, and that the world and his place within it are of paramount importance.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), p. 223.

⁴⁷ The particular inspiration was Mrs Ewing's children's story 'The Brownies' (1865). See *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 147.

⁴⁸ See McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, I, p. 123.

⁴⁹ Bettelheim, p. 52.

As a two-hundred-year-old piper comes walking up the road in Port-na-Sgadan and a fairy prince invades the Big House, the briskly sympathetic Brounie offers welcome support to Su.

There is a particularly strong brownie tradition in Kintyre, as Mitchison knew.

The father started telling stories ... mostly about his own relations and the Campbell fairy which was either here at the house or at Saddell House, and which was at daggers drawn with the brounie at Largie, so that a cousin of his who married the niece of the man at Cara House (where the brounie was as much as at Largie – Cara is definitely haunted) had his bed almost shaken from under him by the brounie. (AYTN, p. 203)

Mitchison's spelling 'brounie' may be noted; here, as in *The Big House*, it indicates the pronunciation, locally invariable. She refers to the tradition again in the Mass-Observation document previously cited, bringing it right up to the time of writing in World War II:

[A] not immoderate wish is usually granted by the Largie brounie. The schoolmaster was kept awake by it (not knowing he was in the brounie's room) when there on Home Guard manoeuvres.⁵⁰

The Brounie of Cara (who appears in Duncan Williamson's stories)⁵¹ was a particularly forceful character.

The Brownie jealously guards the interests of the Largie MacDonalds ... In deference to the Brownie, laird and parish minister are expected to doff their headgear when disembarking at Cara ... Inmates guilty of untidiness often received from the Brownie a skelp in the dark.⁵²

Possibly he is the main source for the Brounie at Port-na-Sgadan (though there may also be some memory of Mitchison's Perthshire childhood; the Brounie does have a few words of Gaelic, but, rather strangely, speaks more in broad Scots than in Mitchison's rendition of the Carradale voice).

The Scottish brownie is, however, closely related to creatures in the folklore of other countries, as W.Y. Evans Wentz has shown in his collation

⁵⁰ See Appendix III.

⁵¹ See for instance 'The Broonie on Carra' [sic], Williamson, pp. 11-15.

⁵² Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, 'The Brownie's Isle', *Field*, 189 (1947), 466-7.

of folklore evidence from Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany.⁵³ An Orkney researcher's notes on the Scandinavian *nisse* show a particularly strong resemblance.

On the one hand [the *nisse*] was cross-grained and peevish, mischievous and full of tricks, while, on the other, he could become very attached to the people he stayed with ... and nearly always went with them to any new farm the might choose to inhabit.

Most relevant to *The Big House* is the suggested origin of the *nisse*.

[I]t is pretty clear that ... his descent can be traced from the *haug-bui* or *haugbonde*, the dweller in the mound. In pagan times each farmer was buried on his own farm. If he was a wealthy, powerful man a large mound would be raised over his grave. ... One could point ... to the mound in which the remote ancestor who had cleared the land *still lived* [my italics] as evidence of the family's ancient possession.⁵⁴

The main attribute of the Brounie, therefore, is that he is attached to one particular house, or, more exactly, to its inhabitants. The connection stretches far back into the past; he is a family spirit, like the Weeper of Carradale Glen, and like Green Jean, the family ghost, in *We Have Been Warned*. It is highly significant to the purpose of *The Big House* that he 'guards the interests' of both Su and Winkie. Su at first dismisses the possibility of the Brounie, but Winkie knows he is still around.

'Nobody in the house has seen it for a hundred years.'

'Aye, because you Big House ones didna need it. But who put in the coals for my own mother's brother that was living in the shore cottage yon night of the big gale?' (pp. 29-30)

Later Su understands: 'Then you will be [Winkie's] helper forby being the helper of the Big House?' and the Brounie confirms this, adding the information previously noted that 'in this time' their names are the same (p. 49). He is, in fact, another device meant to emphasise the common ancestry

⁵³ W.Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911).

⁵⁴ E.W. Marwick, 'Creatures of Orkney legend and their Norse ancestry', *An Orkney Anthology*, ed. by John D.M. Robertson (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1991), pp. 257-78 (266).

of Su and Winkie, and to point up how illogical, as well as inequitable, is the present-day social division which inhibits friendship between them.

4. The fairy hill

The fairy hill is a concept which recurs in Mitchison's writing from the 1930s onwards, becoming particularly important to her in her relationship with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana in the 1960s. The place of this legend in her life and work, and the ways in which her thinking about it can be seen to change over the years, will be discussed in chapter 8.

Its particular importance to *The Big House*, like the importance of the Brounie, is connected with the theme of ancestry which runs through the novel. Mitchison's Fair People are undoubtedly Celtic fairies. It has been suggested that the view of fairies popular today has been influenced by Shakespeare's fairies – Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed – in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, whose names make them seem small and fragile (whatever Shakespeare's vision of them may have been). A Victorian view further linked fairies with the ideal, innocent child.⁵⁵ But Celtic fairies, or at least one race of them – the Sidhe – are tall and handsome rather than small and pretty: they are often identified with the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish legend, the people of the Hindu mother goddess Danu, who have their splendid palaces within the hollow hills.⁵⁶ This is the tradition followed by Mitchison in *The Big House*.

It was a young man in a long green cloak, with the most beautiful wolfhound beside him ... You know the way it is in late summer, when you are out by the sea after dark, and each step you take on the sand leaves a moment's glitter behind it? So it was with the young man's steps on the library carpet, and the dog's footmarks the very same. He was very fair, with bright blue-green eyes, and he had a gold collar on his neck, and gold bracelets, and the hound had a gold collar with square emeralds in it. Su felt awfully as though she wanted to get up and curtsy. He was so obviously a king or a prince. (p. 17)

⁵⁵ See Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: a history of fairies and fairy stories* (Penguin Books, 2001), particularly chapters 5 and 7.

⁵⁶ See Yeats, 'The Tribes of Danu', *Writings on Irish Folklore*, pp. 138-54.

These Celtic fairies, whose home is in the Celtic kingdom of Dalriada or the twentieth-century West Highland county of Argyll (where Carradale is located), indicate that Mitchison is adopting Andrew Lang's theory of the origin of fairy belief.

Mitchison is likely to have known Robert Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth*, a treatise on fairies and fairyland.⁵⁷ Kirk, minister at Aberfoyle between 1685 and 1692 (when he died, or, according to local tradition, was spirited away by the fairies while walking on the local fairy hill), provides a comprehensive description of the fairy realm, and, even more usefully, an account of contemporary views on the subject.

There be many Places called Fairie-hills, which the Mountain People [i.e., Highlanders] think impious and dangerous to peel or discover [i.e., uncover], by taking Earth or Wood from them; superstitiously believing the Souls of their Predicessors to dwell there. (p. 85)

Andrew Lang provides a long introduction for the 1893 edition of Kirk's text,⁵⁸ considering this belief at some length. He dismisses the then-current theory that 'fairies' are a folk memory of an actual race of underground dwellers, Neolithic or Bronze Age people (or perhaps Picts), who lived in the mounds now called fairy hills.⁵⁹ Rather, he recognises that 'fairy hills' are in fact tumuli or barrows; hence, to some extent, the legends of 'fairy gold', deriving from the finding of grave-goods.

In short, though a memory of some old race may have mingled in the composite Fairy belief, this is at most but an element in the whole, and the part played by ancestral spirits, naturally earth-dwellers, is probably more important. Bishop Callaway has pointed out, in the preface to his *Zulu Tales*, that what the Highlanders say of the Fairies the Zulus say of 'the Ancestors'. ... Thus, to my mind at least, the *Subterranean Inhabitants* of Mr Kirk's book are ... a lingering memory of the Chthonian beings, 'the Ancestors'. (pp. 28-9)

⁵⁷ Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, in Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), pp. 77-106. [*The Secret Commonwealth* written c. 1691]

⁵⁸ Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth* (Stirling: Eneas Mackay, 1933). [Reprint of 1893 edition]

It would seem probable that Mitchison knew this passage, and it may supply one of the grounds for the affinity which she felt to exist between herself and the Bakgatla.

A connection between fairies and ancestral spirits is implicit in other Scottish fiction set in the Highlands. The fairies (*sithean*) are sometimes referred to as the people of peace (*sith*); Finn's sighting of a figure from the past at the ruins known as the House of Peace, in Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*, has been cited in chapter 2. Neil Munro's narrator in *John Splendid* (1898) has a similar perception:

To those corries of my native place will be coming in the yellow moon of brock and founmart – the beasts that dote on the autumn eves – the People of Quietness; have I not seen their lanthorns and heard their laughter in the night? – so that they must be blessed corries, so endowed since the gods dwelt in them without tartan and spear in the years of the peace that had no beginning.⁶⁰

It may be noted that 'the yellow moon of brock and founmart', the Badger's Moon, is the full moon of October, the month of Hallowe'en.

Mitchison's view of fairyland will be discussed in chapter 8. Here we shall only note that fairies in the Celtic tradition are not comfortable beings. Stevie Smith captures their unsettling quality in a poem titled – with the deliberate simplicity of the poem itself – 'Fairy Story'.

I went into the wood one day
And there I walked and lost my way

When it was so dark I could not see
A little creature came to me

He said if I would sing a song
The time would not be very long

But first I must let him hold my hand tight
Or else the wood would give me a fright

⁵⁹ David MacRitchie proposes this in his *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), though he was not the first to do so: see Henderson and Cowan, p. 32. Margaret Murray espouses the theory with her usual enthusiasm: see her *The God of the Witches* (1931), pp. 50-64.

⁶⁰ Neil Munro, *John Splendid* (Edinburgh: B and W Publishing, 1994), p. 224. [Originally published 1898]

I sang a song, he let me go
But now I am home again there is nobody I know.⁶¹

When Su's handsome green-cloaked prince frowns, 'his footprints, instead of sparkling light, were singeing and smoking' (p. 17). Fairies are not to be trusted, and the fairy hill is a place of danger. Su and Winkie are aware of its attraction:

They were standing on the lowest step of three stone steps that led up to a doorway, the door of which was half open, and a steady soft light behind it and beyond that the music and a smell that was hawthorn and whin flowers in spring sunshine, and baking bread. (p. 65)

They find an entrancing riverside landscape 'innocent with spring' inside the fairy hill, where a fawn comes trustingly towards them. All is changed in a moment at the caprice of the fairy prince:

A shiver went through everything, a cold wind, a withering of flowers, a flitting away of birds and dragonflies, a fish belly up and stiff in the water. And the fawn dead on the ground between them. (p. 72)

But if the beauty of the fairy hill is an illusion, so perhaps, Mitchison may be indicating, is the power of the fairies (which can, as she shows, be cancelled out by Su and Winkie together). If the fairies are taken, according to Lang's view, to be cognate with 'the ancestors', then the fairy hill in *The Big House* is a further reference to the 'times past' which have distorted social relationships down to the present. Su and Winkie, 'our children', working together as friends, can cancel what has gone before.

The final scene of *The Big House* is again carefully structured to demonstrate the theme of the book. Winkie, at this point a chieftain of the Dark Ages, is informed by a fairy woman that he will be going to 'the stone of the Boar', and one of his followers elucidates: 'It is the stone of Dun Add surely, the old ancient stone' (pp. 144-5). Winkie is puzzled, seeing no reason to go there, and so may the reader be, since a journey to Dunadd (the

⁶¹ Smith, *Collected Poems*, p. 487.

usual modern spelling) abruptly moves the action of the story, hitherto confined to Carradale, some thirty miles north to the area of Crinan.

Winkie's question, however, is answered by a summons from the High Chief to a council at Dunadd, and it becomes clear to the reader that the shift in location is part of Mitchison's purpose. Dunadd, a rocky outcrop on the flat plain of the Moine Mhòr or Great Moss of Crinan, has been identified as a fort of the first millennium AD (the period in which Winkie is a chieftain), when it 'attained its highest status as a settlement of considerable political significance'⁶². The reference by one of her Dark Ages characters to 'the old ancient stone' draws on the possibility, acknowledged by archaeologists, that the site was of importance at a much earlier date.

Winkie and Su find the stone of the Boar, bearing a possibly Pictish carving of a boar, and the stone of the footmark, thought to mark the site of an inauguration ceremony at which the authority of a king was affirmed by his people. Mitchison noticed, when she attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, that a Recognition of the Queen was still part of 'the ceremony which so strangely combines Christian with pre-Christian feeling'.⁶³ Her character Winkie, in his Dark Ages role, equally knows about this, and shares the belief that the king's authority was not only recognised by the current tribesmen, but handed down from 'the people who might have been there', the earlier inhabitants of the land: 'The stone of the Boar is the old stone of crowning, and there could be spirits there that would not maybe like to be woken at night.' (p. 155) The stone of the Boar and the stone of the footmark can still be seen today. Dunadd is a tangible link with 'the ancestors'.

Mitchison concludes by bringing Su and Winkie back to the present day, but, deliberately departing from one convention of children's fiction, she does not bring them to the point from which their adventure started.

[Winkie's torch] clicked on, shining on Su, on grass, on stones, on one stone with lines on it, the fierce narrow head of a boar. (p. 161)

⁶² Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll: an inventory of the monuments*, VI (HMSO, 1988), p. 159.

⁶³ NM, 'Coronation Hangover', *Forward*, 47 (13 June 1953), 1, 8.

They are still at Dunadd. Their journey, in other words, is not finished. Symbolically, there is more for them to do, so that as adults they will be able to mend the present class division, apparent to them even as children, which has been shaped by the past.

The ending of the book, like the beginning, is in realistic mode, with a final hint of the irrational: Su still has a scar from her time as a swan maiden, and, it appears, has had it in the present day from birth (p. 169). There is still some awkwardness on Winkie's side and a slight bossiness on Su's: Mitchison is too honest to smooth that away. The most she can do is to postulate that the understanding gained by her fictional characters will result in the rapprochement between the Big House and the village which she hopes for in her Carradale life.

CHAPTER 6

Magic in the community: *Lobsters on the Agenda*

There is a loch of tears with great monsters in it,
Though no-one believes in them but I who have seen them.
They come skulking and rippling through, minute by minute
Leaving the waters dark and disturbed between them. ...

But on the bright surface boats are constantly going,
For fish or trade, merry with the lock-keepers' daughters,
As Adam was merry with Eve under the green leaves growing,
Forgetting what always lies under the deep water.¹

Lobsters on the Agenda, published in 1952,² is Mitchison's only full-length fictional treatment for adults of contemporary Scottish life. For some years after the publication of *The Bull Calves* in 1947 she turned more regularly than before to writing in various genres about contemporary Scotland, and in particular about the community of Carradale, the village where she had now lived for more than a decade. Close in time to *The Big House* she published *Men and Herring: a documentary*, which depicts a week in the life of the Carradale fishing fleet³. The play *Spindrift*, set in a similar fishing community, was produced at the Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow, and published in an acting edition in 1951.⁴

Near-contemporary with these are several short stories in the *Glasgow Evening Citizen*: 'The Old Mill' (11 February 1949); 'The Big Mill' (4 June 1949); 'On an Island' (28 June 1949)⁵; and 'Boy and Neeps' (13 September 1949). Each focuses on an activity or aspect of Scottish farming and country

¹ From NM, 'The Highland Scene: The Great Fault', *CK*, p. 33.

² NM: *Lobsters on the Agenda* (Gollancz, 1952). Hereafter *LA*.

³ NM and Denis Macintosh, *Men and Herring: a documentary* (Edinburgh: Serif Books, 1949). Hereafter *MH*.

⁴ NM, *Spindrift* (Samuel French, 1951). See NM, 'Spindrift at the Citizens', *Scotland's SMT Magazine*, 47 (December 1951), 42-4.

life. 'Boy and Neeps', for instance, reflects Mitchison's practical preoccupations during her early years at Carradale. The boy Rob is snedding neeps (cutting the roots and leaves off turnips) and thinking about better ways to do this cold and boring job, and the possibility of moving to a more modern farm. Mitchison, working a run-down farm at Carradale in difficult wartime conditions, while in her spare time writing *The Bull Calves* with its sidelights on eighteenth-century agriculture, had found herself continually balancing old methods with new:

Our crops will be better in quality; but the rotation is much the same as it has been since the end of the ancient run-rig ... We drain much as our forefathers did ... We have not come to the bottom of soil chemistry ... When any of us tries anything new, then all the rest prick up their ears. I am going to see what can be done with electric fencing this year.⁶

This group of publications during the late 1940s and early 1950s indicates that now, more than ever before, Mitchison was using the contemporary West Highlands as inspiration and background for her writing, and might seem to suggest that her next work of adult fiction would be a realistic novel with such a setting. To some extent *Lobsters on the Agenda*, with its frequent references to the problems of rural industries and living conditions, can be seen as being aligned with the shorter works immediately preceding it. The tentative romance in 'The Old Mill' clearly points forward to the thoughts of the more experienced Roddy in *Lobsters on the Agenda*:

Dougy was thinking about the dance on Saturday. Effie had let him see her back. Maybe he should have had just a bittie more courage? But you could never be just sure with the lassies. Kittle cattle indeed. And her so bonny. ('The Old Mill')

[Roddy] had half meant to walk back to the Bee House with poor Kate ... [I]t was kind of sore on him to see her going off into the dark with her wee torch, never a man's arm to go round her. Maybe she was not wanting such things. He could not know at all when the womenfolk stopped wanting them. (*LA*, p. 47)

⁵ 'On an Island' (*FMS* pp. 112-15) provides one plot strand in NM's children's novel *The Far Harbour* (Collins, 1957).

⁶ NM, 'A Small Farmer Looks at her Farm', *SMT Magazine*, 29 (March 1942), 27-9.

Thus at first glance *Lobsters on the Agenda* is a humorous realistic novel set in the West Highlands, based largely on contemporary observation and experience. Plot strands include the mystery of the eponymous lobsters; the local good-time girl's attempt to serve a paternity suit on Roddy the forester; and the scandal of the boarded-out children. The unifying narration concerns the proposal for a village hall in Port Sonas, supported by some residents and fiercely rejected by others.

But there is something moving behind this realistic façade. A silent young man, Fred Macfie 'from Balana on the Kilmolue road' (p. 24), reluctantly accepts a place on the Village Hall Committee. Unlike most of his neighbours, he appears unimpressed by the hell-fire sermons of the Kilmolue missionary.⁷ 'Me, I'm from Balana, I wasna heeding,' he says casually (p. 40); this cryptic remark is later expanded on, if not yet fully explained. A piper in Kilmolue has been swayed by the preaching of the missionary to burn his pipes, which Fred, foreseeing exactly this, had tried to keep hidden. It is observed that 'young Fred will have something to say'.

'That's so' said Angus, 'that's so indeed. And I wouldna like myself to get across the Balana crowd. ... [I]t's just a feeling I have. There's a kinna antrin [uncanny] look about Balana.' (p. 82)

The missionary falls and sprains his ankle, and in his house is found a *buidseachas*, a charm (pp. 150-1). This word is derived from *buidseach*, a witch, traditionally 'applied to both "black" and "white" witches ... but [commonly] to those who could do harm'.⁸ Roddy (whose complex view of the supernatural will be examined later in this chapter) accuses Fred of working 'sorceries and witchcraft' on the missionary, a charge Fred neither confirms nor denies (pp. 162-4). By the end of the week, at another Village Hall Committee meeting, we are allowed, for the only time in the book, a glimpse of Fred's thoughts.

He was pleased with the way things were going. ... [There would be] a great hole in the power of the missionary. A hole you could see the blood running out. ... And it was great that he knew how to help, the

⁷ A lay preacher, employed in this case by the Free Presbyterian church.

⁸ Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, p. 18.

same way he knew in the war how to use a rifle and kill Germans. He had been a sniper and off on his own more than once. He liked that. (p. 244)

Thus *Lobsters on the Agenda* has a strong supernatural strand. Mitchison is not presenting a straightforwardly realistic picture of a Highland community, as in *Men and Herring*, *Spindrift*, and the *Evening Citizen* stories; in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, as in *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves*, she intertwines the irrational with the realistic. In the earlier novels the irrational touches individual characters such as Dione, Phoebe and Kirstie, but here Mitchison depicts a whole community where magic runs alongside everyday life.

Her depiction of the community, similarly, is not as realistic as it may at first appear. The novel follows the events of a single week, a structure similar to the format of *Men and Herring*, and the chapter headings strengthen the impression that this too is a documentary. The headings specify days in that week and meetings held by different sections of the community for religious, social or administrative reasons ('Saturday Evening: Village Meeting', 'Sunday: Morning Service'), or informal gatherings which are also forums of common discussion ('Wednesday Evening: At the Bar').

Isobel Murray has pointed out that 'all this realism is a kind of qualified realism', comparing the structure of the novel with that of George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* (1972).

[M]aybe it is one particular week when the stranger comes to Greenvoe to take notes, as in *Lobsters on the Agenda* it is the week of the visit of the Highland Panel, but in some sense it is also in both cases every week, giving an impression of the relatively smooth tenor of very many days. A synthesis of time and timelessness seems present in both books, and a strictly literal, linear week is not intended.⁹

Thus the air of realism given by the chapter headings of *Lobsters on the Agenda* is superficial only: this is a fictionalised view. We may compare the professed documentary *Men and Herring*, which itself has been edited

⁹ Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', *Lobsters on the Agenda* (Colonsay: House of Lochar, 1997), pp. [i-ix] (vii).

like a documentary film. Though it too appears to depict a single week, the film-maker John Grierson recognises in his review that its events have been drawn from experience over a considerable time and recast in a fictional form.

[I]t is for the intimate fact of the matter that *Men and Herring* first recommends itself. ... The interesting thing in documentary is what you do with the atmosphere and the description: how you shape it up so that from the intimate fact of the matter a form unfolds.¹⁰

Mitchison has purposefully shaped *Lobsters on the Agenda*, with its chapter headings citing, in a village of a few hundred people, nine secular and three religious organisations, to signal a divided community: the factionalism of the village is mirrored in the structure of the novel. As the village hall story is the unifying narrative, but also points up the areas of disunity, so Kate Snow is the central character, but it is not always her view of affairs which we receive.

Kate is a doctor who knows the village of Port Sonas from holiday visits in her youth and has now settled there as a war widow with her elderly father, and the novel opens in her voice.

If Isa was to see her boy who was working at Lochaber with the aluminium, and they were engaged and all now, so she would be wanting to surely, she would need to get the Friday afternoon bus ... (p. 9)

The point about Isa's romance is that in her absence Kate has to do the milking, which she carries out with weary good humour, and in the process we learn, as well as some tips on preventing mastitis, much about Kate, whose relationship with the village is a central theme.

Yet though Kate as a District Councillor is involved with many of the topics discussed in the various meetings which supply the chapter headings, there are meetings which she does not attend. Isobel Murray points out a 'third person narrator [who] is something else – or someone else?'¹¹ This

¹⁰ John Grierson, 'Men at the Fishing', *Scotland*, 39 (1950), 77-81 (pp. 78, 79).

¹¹ Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', *LA*, p. [viii].

narrator, however, does not seem to be the same person from chapter to chapter. At the Fisherman's Meeting on Monday he sounds like a fisherman:

It was a bit past the hour and they wouldn't need to be too late because of getting a start and being out on the fishing grounds before night. (p. 88)

At the Women's Rural Institute meeting on Wednesday she is surely a Rural member:

Mrs Fergusson, the Minister's wife, a nice enough woman but with an English voice, and her nose the wee-est bit crooked, not that this would be noticed in a Manse. (p. 137)

This is not just Mitchison's generic 'Carradale voice', but the voice of a gossipy, slightly bitchy village woman. It is an example of what the critic Hugh Kenner has called the Uncle Charles Principle, that 'the narrative idiom need not be the narrator's'.¹² The 'Uncle Charles' reference is to the phrase in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'Every morning, therefore, Uncle Charles repaired to his outhouse ...' Wyndham Lewis censured Joyce for using the genteel cliché 'repaired'. Kenner, however, recognises that the word is there for a purpose:

It would be Uncle Charles's own word should he chance to say what he was doing. Uncle Charles has notions of semantic elegance ... If Uncle Charles spoke at all of his excursions to what he calls the outhouse, he would speak of 'repairing' there.¹³

Similarly, the third-person narrator who efficiently keeps the narrative of *Lobsters on the Agenda* moving along for much of the novel would not necessarily describe the Minister's wife's nose as 'the wee-est bit crooked' (nor would Mitchison, writing in her own persona). It is the unnamed but none the less vividly conceived character who would use that phrase.

Occasionally several voices are heard at once:

It was observed by several people that Roddy had gone to the Bee House with a suitcase ... Well, well, they wondered what would the Laird say if he knew that she was taking the like of Roddy into her

¹² See Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Faber and Faber, 1978), pp. 15-21.

¹³ Kenner, p. 17.

house? ... There was, however, another whisper ... There was this that Sinclair and Angus were saying ... (p. 244)

At such moments the narrator is perhaps a protean figure, the voice of the village. We may compare the voice which comments on the inhabitants of Kinraddie in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*.

[Chae Strachan] was well-liked, though folk laughed at him. But God knows, who is it they don't laugh at? ... [A]ll the time he'd be telling you that socialism was coming ... [but] folk said he'd more need to start socializing Mistress Strachan ... [Ewen Tavendale] was an impudent brute, calm as you please, but an awful good worker, folk said he could smell the weather and had fair the land in his bones.¹⁴

Such a comparison is not entirely to Mitchison's advantage. Gibbon's use of voices is a conscious device throughout *Sunset Song* (and the following novels in the trilogy) and his presentation of his chorus of voices has a richness and depth which hers does not: for instance, he allows the chorus to comment wryly on itself ('who is it they don't laugh at?'). Mitchison's chorus, introduced only occasionally, does not attain this degree of subtlety, though it does suggest, when she uses it, the background of a complete community against which her story is played out.

Whoever the metamorphic narrator may be, the voice is that of a local and therefore not that of Kate Snow, who is an outsider and aware of the fact. Occasionally we are privileged to learn more of the village view of Kate than she herself does:

... I must be extra polite to this lot, she thought, one never knows. It might make them better pleased with the Hall! But what do they think of me behind my back? As she went in, Ian complained, 'I canna hardly make out what she says with yon Englishy voice she has!'

'Ach, well' said one of the others, 'maybe she canna change it.'

But she did not hear, for now she was inside ... (p. 56)

We have noted in chapter 5 Mitchison's wish to be part of Carradale life and her perception that she can never quite be so. She expresses this again in an obituary tribute to her friend and fellow county councillor Jack Reid of

¹⁴ Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, pp. 21, 22, 29. (*Sunset Song* originally published 1932)

Kinlochleven, who died while she was completing *Lobsters on the Agenda* (the novel is dedicated to his memory).

[It] could be bitter enough for me with the barrier of the Big House between me and many with whom I wanted brotherhood and whom I thought I could help ... I seemed to work and strive but to be forever slipping on sand and withered leaves ... Jack Reid understood.¹⁵

Kate Snow, the educated outsider involved in local government and village concerns, experiences the same sort of frustration.

‘I should advise you to let the thing be for a while. What’s a year or two or ten years itself? They’ve been two hundred years without a village hall and it will do them no harm to wait a while longer.’ ...

‘I wonder if you realise how much work I have put into it already, Mr Thompson?’ ... She walked away quickly, stumbling a little. ... (pp. 179-80)

Can we therefore identify her as Mitchison, as we have tentatively identified Dione, Phoebe and Kirstie? The case is not straightforward. Kate is trying to get a village hall which she believes will benefit the community; Mitchison had been a prime mover in obtaining a village hall for Carradale (it was opened in October 1940, early in her time there; see *AYTN*, pp. 96-8); but that does not necessarily mean that Kate is Mitchison. The extent to which the portrait of Kate is autobiographical is an important question in evaluating whether *Lobsters on the Agenda* is a disguised account of experience – a documentary, indeed – or a fully achieved work of fiction.

We may ask, to begin with, whether Port Sonas is Carradale. The fictional village has many of the problems which Mitchison describes in her essay ‘Rural Reconstruction’, written in 1943 when she had lived in Carradale for four or five years. ‘There are not enough houses ... Our transport is very bad ... We want various social services ... Our water supply is most inadequate.’¹⁶ Many of the croft houses in the Port Sonas hinterland are damp and few have piped water (pp. 109-10). There is a need for a bridge, without which ‘the Torskadale crofts might have been in another country

¹⁵ NM, ‘Highland Socialist’, *Forward*, 44 (29 April 1950), 8.

¹⁶ NM, ‘Rural Reconstruction’, in *The New Scotland* (London Scots Self-Government Committee, 1943), pp. 92-107.

almost' (p. 58), while a new harbour and an improved croft road are both on the agenda, but years away (pp. 173-5).

Above all, Mitchison concludes in 'Rural Reconstruction', 'life is dull', and this 'drives young people away', while driving women in particular into gossip, quarrelling and feuds, 'one vast series of mole-hills talked into mountains!' These are principal concerns in *Lobsters on the Agenda*: the social and mental narrowness of the village, together with the economic consequences when its young people leave. Kate hopes that a village hall will help the situation: in a neat illustration of her difficulties, it is a series of narrow-minded objections which derails her Village Hall Committee almost before it has started work.

To this extent an identification of Port Sonas with Carradale is plausible, leading to a tentative identification of Kate Snow with Naomi Mitchison. By the time she is writing *Lobsters on the Agenda*, however, Mitchison's acquaintance with the problems of the West Highlands extends beyond Carradale and beyond her own personal experience. In 1947 she had been appointed to the Highland Advisory Panel set up to advise the Secretary of State for Scotland on matters concerning the Highlands.¹⁷ An early reviewer of *Lobsters on the Agenda* was in no doubt as to the source of much of her material.

Now the Members of Parliament for Motherwell and the Western Isles and all the other members of the Highland Panel will know what their colleague, Mrs Mitchison, was doing during the drearier stretches of their many meetings in small Highland communities ... it is clear that she wasn't listening with the politician's ear to the platitudes, but with the artist's ear to the undertones of the arguments and the grumbles and the squabbles revealing the criss-cross of loyalties which exist in even the smallest village.¹⁸

On this reading *Lobsters on the Agenda* is not a specifically Carradale novel, but a Highland one.

¹⁷ In 1964 it was replaced by the Highlands and Islands Development Board.

¹⁸ 'GMT' [i.e. G.Morgan Thomson], 'The Lid Off a Highland Village' [review of *LOA*], *Forward*, 46 (17 May 1952), 2.

Moreover, Port Sonas is no specific Highland village, but a fictional one. Though the village is on the west coast (p. 63), it is hard to say exactly where. The placenames in the area are similar to many in the Highlands – Kinlochbannag, Glenlurg, Halbost (p. 9) – but they are not to be found on any map. The occasional real places mentioned, like Fort William and Glasgow, are invariably at a distance from Port Sonas. The problems about houses, transport and water which Mitchison had described in 1943 with reference to Carradale were still troubling many remote areas of the Highlands and the Western Isles in 1952. Further, when discussing a possible move by the County Council which might attract a grant, a councillor points out: ‘... there’s other County Councils are doing it. Look at Argyll and Inverness and the great grants they’re getting.’ (p. 123) A West Highland village which is neither in Argyll nor in Inverness-shire would seem to be occupying a fictional space.

Mitchison, through the eyes of Kate Snow, is considering a wide field: the Highland way of life, as she had come to know it over some fifteen years, first as laird of Carradale and then as a Highland Panel member. It was a topic which had interested her since she moved to the West Highlands. An anecdote from the early days of the Highland Panel captures her enthusiasm, and the reception it sometimes received.

I recall that at [the Panel’s] first meeting, having kept silent throughout, [NM] rose at the end to speak, interminably, under ‘AOB’, about ‘the Highland ethos’. When she eventually paused to draw breath, an empurpled Lochiel jumped to his feet and said, ‘I propose a vote of thanks to the chair’, and we heard no more from her.¹⁹

Possibly Cameron of Lochiel, the hereditary chief of his clan, did not feel that he needed to be told about the Highland ethos by someone who was, in the Highland term, an incomer. (It is equally possible that he disagreed with her, or was bored, or that the sexism so sharply observed in *Lobsters on the Agenda* played a part; the incident illustrates, perhaps, the complex array of difficulties which Mitchison faced in her Highland enterprise.)

¹⁹ Forsyth Hardy, ‘Gathering Up’ [review of *YMWA*], *Books in Scotland*, 5 (1979), 27.

Five years after that meeting, however, Mitchison has attained a detachment which tempers her view, and allows her character Kate Snow to be a little more concise:

You could sum up the Highland way of life, she thought, if you were unkind, in four words: devilment, obligation, refreshment, buggerment. (p. 213)

This observation has, in fact, a certain ring of Mitchison about it, and whether it is to be attributed to Kate or to Mitchison, it is an outsider's view.

In fact, as Mitchison has established that Port Sonas is not Carradale, she has gone to some trouble to establish that Kate is not herself. The Highland Panel hold a meeting in Port Sonas during the course of *Lobsters on the Agenda*, and the personnel are sketched from life. 'Mr Wood, the Chief Fishery Officer for Scotland ... Alec Anderson, Member of Parliament for Motherwell ... Colonel Henderson ... and Miss Campbell, secretary to the group' (p. 167) all appear, down to such details as the Colonel's travelling rations of milk and oatcakes, in the various pieces which Mitchison wrote about her Highland Panel involvement.²⁰ The party also includes 'Mrs Mitchison, short and solid in the leather coat, knitted stockings and heavy shoes' with her 'more or less portable typewriter' (p. 167). She is described a little earlier by Kate as 'Mrs Mitchison from Carradale; she writes books' (p. 164). Thus Mitchison carefully dissociates herself from Kate Snow.

'Mrs Mitchison', however, has a further importance in the plan of the novel. It has been suggested in chapter 3 that the character Dione in *We Have Been Warned*, whose enthusiastic socialism sits so uneasily with her privileged lifestyle, may be Mitchison's ironic view of herself at that period of her life. The character Mrs Mitchison is portrayed as equally enthusiastic (particularly, as we shall see, about the White Goddess, an esoteric enough theme to discuss over after-dinner coffee in Port Sonas). She is seen by the Port Sonas villagers as distinctly eccentric, and volunteers the information that this is also the view in her home village of Carradale: 'I was a witch, a

²⁰ See NM, 'Highland Panel Journeys', *Scotland's Magazine*, 49 (February 1953), 18-21, and *SSP*, *passim*.

stranger. I did things out of pattern. I upset people. I wore the wrong kind of hat.' (p. 205)

She is a stranger, an incomer, and so is Kate. Perhaps Mitchison is here providing a clear-eyed view of herself as outsider (whether as Mrs Mitchison or as Kate, or both) and acknowledging what she came to acknowledge reluctantly in Carradale, that she will always remain an outsider. This view may lead to another reading of the novel: that the Highland way of life, however unsatisfactory in some respects, will continue in its own way, defeating the efforts of both Kate and Mitchison to change or improve it, and outlasting them both.

Mitchison names her village Port Sonas, 'harbour of contentment'. Is this ironic, given that so many aspects of life there are unsatisfactory, and that Kate herself is only intermittently content?

I thought if once I could come back to Port Sonas, things would be kindly and slow and happy again. No, not happy exactly, but healing. But welcoming. I remember saying that. I wonder what I'd say about it now. The oddest thing is that there are times I'd say the same thing. Not often. (p. 10)

There is another possibility. While Kate, the outsider, an educated woman and a doctor, sees a great deal wrong with Port Sonas, she also sees much that is right, and these elements are seen to derive from the older way of life: 'if you went in there'd be a place and cup for you in no time, and the words of welcome, the voices.' (p. 130) Mitchison may be suggesting that Port Sonas and similar Highland villages were indeed harbours of contentment when the name was coined, when 'the Highland ethos' held sway.

Good and bad are at times seen to co-exist in one section of the community, or indeed in one person. Norman, the old handloom weaver, is depicted as wise and understanding, in touch with deep sources of content.

Norman and one of the old crofters ... spoke of the beauty of the day and of the goodness of its Creator. Their speech was of the same kind as that of the psalms which were in their minds ... He nodded his head [at Kate's troubles with her elderly father] comfortingly, wisely. He had seen such things before. He knew them for inessential. (pp. 60-61)

Yet almost immediately, when Kate and her friend Janet suggest that the Kirk Session, of which Norman is a member, should deal with a problem in the village, his tone changes.

Norman said nothing for a moment. Then he drew himself up. 'It's not for the women to say what we should do.' He turned from Janet to Kate. 'For neither of the two of you: go you home now and be not presumptuous.'

He was staring at Kate, and now, she thought, he is no more kind nor wise; he is only jealous in case he is proved to have less power than he wants to have. (p. 61)

The context of Norman's volte-face is significant. Kate and Janet have questioned the actions, or in this case the inaction, of the Kirk Session. The power which Norman may perceive to be in jeopardy is not (or not only) his personal power, but that of the Session, which is to say, in the Presbyterian model of church government, that of the church. It is indicated throughout *Lobsters on the Agenda* that the influence of the church has distorted the Highland way of life.

That influence is considerable in Port Sonas. Three denominations are represented in the village: the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland (known, not always affectionately, as the Wee Frees), and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Their ubiquity in everyday life is signalled by the frequency of church-related occasions in the chapter headings: not only Sunday services, but weekday choir meeting, prayer meeting and Bible study class. The Free Presbyterians are the most fundamentalist, the narrowest in outlook, and the most strongly set against the idea of a village hall, but none of the three seems to be well regarded by Mitchison.

Yet she does take some care to suggest that a more favourable view of religion may be possible. Kate, in a long conversation with a comparatively congenial minister (pp. 118-122), raises the question of the churches and their irrelevance to the Highland way of life.

'Ah,' said Mr Stewart, and pushed his plate away. 'Now I've a question for you. This Highland way of life, and I think we know it when we see it, both the two of us: it's in the old folk, isn't it?'

She nodded, thinking of Norman and a half dozen more whom she knew between Halbost and Port Sonas.

‘And aren’t they all strict church-goers and in your own words getting something out of it?’

‘I think I would agree,’ she said. (p. 120)

But she is not entirely convinced. By leaving the question open, Mitchison may be indicating that Kate’s original perception is near the truth: the influence of the churches is inimical to the Highland way of life. The favourable presentation of Mr Stewart’s belief and practice, and Kate’s contradictory response – she likes him, but feels at odds with him too – would suggest, however, that Mitchison’s strictures are not directed at religious belief as such. Rather, she is criticising the doctrines and forms of organised religion, or what these may become if manipulated in certain ways. There is an implication that ‘the old folk’, far from allowing the authority of the church to dictate a new mode of behaviour, are making use of the conventions and structures which it provides in order to maintain a necessary economic and social equilibrium, while continuing to pursue ‘the Highland way of life’.

And it appears that Mitchison identifies another element in the Highland way of life. In her journeys on Highland Panel business she found the multiplicity of Presbyterian denominations depicted in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, but she also found, or thought she found, the irrational in belief and practice, not only accompanying but opposing organised Christianity.

In the outer islands I remember so clearly the sense of being in another [i.e. Gaelic-speaking] culture ... it was a culture partly dominated by a remarkably narrow religion. Where a church like the Free Presbyterians is in control, witchcraft as the alternative raises its head, and we heard of some curious happenings. (*SSP*, p. 15)

She goes on to report that in these islands ‘someone would draw back and ask me in a whisper “What chance of a village hall?”’ The perceived link between Free Presbyterians, village halls and ‘curious happenings’ becomes evident in a letter which Mitchison wrote to Neil Gunn in 1947.

I have just come back from the island of Raasay, where I was with the Highland Panel, considering the matter of harbours, lobster fishing and so on. ... After some time I asked about the social life – was there a

village hall? then it came out that the Free Presbyterian missionaries and the Wee Free missionary who was much about the same, would not let them have one, and preached against them for having music or reading anything but sermons. [NM discusses this with 'a young widow, educated' who has worked in the south.] She spoke more and more about the missionaries ... she didn't want to leave the Highlands, but they could be full of happiness, but for this black thing that was on them. ... For these black ones are driving out the young folk.

I said to her that she could use all means against the powers of evil and I also said a thing which I would not have said ten years ago ... that if she met with any signs she was to take them, for unreason cannot be beaten by reason alone.²¹

This conversation looks very much like a trigger for *Lobsters on the Agenda*: 'Unreason cannot be beaten by reason alone' might be an epigraph for the novel. Kate Snow, the embodiment of reason, struggles with little obvious success to deal with village problems through the usual channels, until (as it seems) help is provided by the enigmatic Fred.

Mitchison's fiction, taken as a whole, seems to indicate a view that a good community requires a belief system: a background or framework of belief in a religious or mythical power. This may be a more or less organised religion: a pantheon, Greek, Roman or Norse, is present in her early historical fiction. Also present, however, are more shadowy powers whereby, for instance, it is possible for Meromic in *The Conquered* to be transformed into his clan's totem animal, the wolf. In Mitchison's invented society of Marob, in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, the belief system is one of myth, drawing on the fertility rituals documented in *The Golden Bough* and hence on Frazer's concept of sympathetic magic.

Mitchison appears to have carried this perception of magic as an essential component of society into her view of the real community of Carradale, as presented in *The Big House*, and later into her view of community life in Africa (where, as we have seen in chapter 1, such a perception was so general as to be officially recognised by the legal system). In such a community, Fred Macfie can be seen as one of the 'cunning folk'

²¹ Quoted in Donald Smith, 'NM and Neil Gunn: a Highland friendship', *Cencrastus*, 13 (Summer 1983), 17-20 (p. 20).

who performed a useful function through their acquired or inherited skills in human and veterinary medicine, apart from carrying out more esoteric services. The pattern is most clearly seen in villages and rural areas.²² Mitchison's apparent view that the industrial and technological advances which underlie urbanisation are inimical to magic will be explored in chapter 7.

A situation in which the practice of magic has survived alongside the growth of Christianity is fully congruent with the witchcraft theory of Margaret Murray.²³ The magic in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, moreover, is linked (as in Murray, and as in Frazer) with the earth, fertility, nature. Fred, sitting so quietly at the Village Hall Committee Meeting, has 'a strong farm smell off him' (p. 38). When he describes the missionary's flock he goes beyond the hackneyed metaphor: 'They are like nothing in the world but sheep, and once there's a stumble from the big fellow, they will go whichever way they are herded.' (p. 163) (While this view of people *en masse* perhaps sits uneasily with Mitchison's lifelong socialism, it chimes with her equally deep-rooted hatred of fascism or any kind of indoctrination.) Fred knows about sheep, coming as he does from the crofting community of Kilmolue up the glen, which is depicted as both more backward and more introverted – but, implicitly, closer to elemental values – than the comparatively urbanised Port Sonas with its school and steamer pier.

It may be noted that old Norman in his kindly, wise mode, the personification of the old Highland way of life, is conversing with his friend about 'the beauty of the day' (p. 60). Mitchison is equating the Highland way of life with a closeness to natural things, a closeness she also attributes to Fred. In opposition she places the churches, with their objection to such pagan (and natural) pastimes as music, dancing and sex. We may think of John Guthrie in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, a harsh bigot when we

²² For the situation in Scotland, see Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, especially chapter 5, 'Functional Folklore'; for England and Wales, see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford University Press, 1999), especially chapter 6, 'Finding a Low Magic'.

²³ See chapters 3 and 4 and Appendix I.

meet him, but originally in tune with the rhythms of nature, which indeed still resonate with him at times.

[E]very harvest there came something queer and terrible on father, you couldn't handle the thing with a name, it was as if he grew stronger and crueller then, ripe and strong with the strength of the corn.²⁴

When Mrs Mitchison, the character in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, hears of the magic which may have been practised by Fred, she embarks on a fairly lengthy exegesis which suggests a specific source for his power.

Kilmolue must have been the church of Saint Molue – you know, one of the Columban saints ... Well then, Kilmolue was taken over by the Free Presbyterians. They probably let the old church go to ruins ... You see, they brought it on themselves. And then this chap, Macfie – Mac an-t-Sith could it be? – or is he a son of the Faas, the Pharoah-folk? – well, anyway, he comes from Balana. That's the township of Ana and Ana was the White Goddess, the Goddess of life, the fertility Goddess who was there before Saint Molue even. Her man would be bound to be against Free Presbyterians, the people of death, wouldn't he? (pp. 198-9)

Even if Mrs Mitchison is not entirely clear about Fred's antecedents, she is sure that they have a supernatural element: Mac an-t-Sith is 'son of the fairy', while as a son of the Faas he would be descended from the tinkers or travellers, whose traditional connections with the otherworld have been noted in chapter 5. In either case, she is certain that the presiding entity is the White Goddess or Great Goddess, who, in some views of the development of religious belief, was 'there' not only 'before Saint Molue' but before any of the patriarchal religions such as Judaism and Christianity. The Goddess appears, or is symbolised, elsewhere in Mitchison's writing, and will be discussed in chapter 7.

Her introduction here is an apt reinforcement for a subsidiary theme of *Lobsters on the Agenda*: the position of women in this Highland community. Norman's rebuke to Kate and Janet is not merely doctrinaire: 'It's not for the women to say what we should do.' (p. 61) Though the term 'sexist' was as yet

²⁴ Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, p.61. [*Sunset Song* originally published 1932] See Douglas Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1983), pp. 80-81 (on John Guthrie) and passim (on Gibbon's treatment of 'The Land').

uncoined in 1952, the import is apparent to both women, and immediately recalls to Janet a whole range of resentments in her life.

She was thinking ... of several men at the once, but mostly of her father, whom she was bound to love, but who had taken her away from school just when everything was opening out; and her brothers, who had taken it for granted that they were to go on; and Duncan Macrae ... she had thought he was a decent lad, but when she said no, he had said – ach, she could never forget it! (p. 62)

Kate, similarly, encounters sexist attitudes in her various committees and panels, noting wryly the assumption that the only woman present will know how to find a school cleaner: ‘The old wretch, expecting her to know, he wouldn’t have said it to any of the men!’ (p. 115). No doubt Mitchison, a veteran of committee work with Argyll County Council, the Highland Panel and other bodies, speaks here from experience: she may have found some satisfaction in attributing the sorceries of Balana to a powerful female force.

But is Mitchison at all serious, either in her identification of Fred Macfie as the Goddess’s man, or in the suggestion that magic is being, or could be, used to obtain a Village Hall for Port Sonas? Her presentation of the case through the character Mrs Mitchison makes it particularly hard for us to decide whether she is being ironic. It has been noted that the people of Port Sonas (and those of Carradale) see Mrs Mitchison as slightly eccentric and out of touch with reality. The question is whether we are to believe anything this oddity says.

The situation resembles that brought about by the appearance of James Hogg as a character in his *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.²⁵ The interest of the Editor has been aroused (p. 165) by ‘an authentic letter, published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* for August, 1823’ from one James Hogg of Altrive Lake, describing the discovery of a suicide’s grave. He asks an acquaintance whether the story is true, receiving the unenthusiastic reply, ‘I suppose so ... But, God knows! Hogg has imposed as ingenious lies on the public ere now.’ (p. 169)

The Editor nevertheless travels to meet Hogg at the ewe fair of Thirlstane, but cannot prevail upon him to accompany the party to the mysterious grave.

‘Od bless ye, lad! [says Hogg] I hae ither matters to mind. I hae a’ thae paulies to sell, an’ a’ yon Highland stotts down on the green every ane; an’ then I hae ten scores of yowes to buy after ... I hae mair ado than I can manage the day, foreby ganging to houk up hunder-year-auld banes.’ (p. 170)

The party, ‘finding that we could make nothing of him’, leave him and engage another guide, which is just as well, since his description of the location of the grave is found to have been inaccurate, ‘hardly a bit o’t correct’ (p. 170). Hogg’s deliberate caricature of himself as a yokel and the consequent discrediting of his evidence, which adds a further layer of doubt to the already ambiguous narrative, is perhaps paralleled to some extent in Mitchison’s depiction of the eccentric Mrs Mitchison, for the people of Port Sonas (and of Carradale) can apparently make nothing of her.

Yet Hogg’s irony is clearly directed at a certain set of expectations – the shepherd as brainless yokel and philistine – which he knows to be untrue and deliberately sets out to mock. Mitchison’s stance is not so clear. Her character Mrs Mitchison acknowledges, if ironically, the truth of some of the criticisms levelled at her, while maintaining views and practices that help to distance her from the community she cares for; she may reflect once more Mitchison’s awareness of the contradictions in her own life.

The question of belief hangs over *Lobsters on the Agenda*. It is not only the reader who is in doubt as to whether to believe Mrs Mitchison, and, further, whether she herself believes the White Goddess theory she is putting forward. The uncertainty extends to the characters too. David, the schoolmaster, is unable to decide.

[H]e cast a glance at Mrs Mitchison: *did* she believe it, or could it be she was laughing at them? (p. 199)

²⁵ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by P.D. Garside (Edinburgh University Press, 2002). On the ‘letter’, see Introduction, p. xlv. [Originally published 1824]

Even if she does believe it, should it be believed? David knows that, as an educated man, he himself should not believe in witchcraft, charms or the powers of Fred Macfie, but

... a terrible nasty thought and longing went through David and he recognised that he had admitted for a moment – oh for a moment only! – that it could be true ... ‘The thing is nonsense, oh it couldn’t be more so!’ (p. 199)

Kate, a doctor, absolutely refuses to believe, and points out the potential dangers in belief.

‘If you believe this ... it means – oh, it means a hole in the wall of sanity we’ve built through the last thousand years – against the sea of superstition and ignorance, yes, and cruelty before it’s done! If you start believing it you’ll start being afraid of Fred and so will other people and next thing you’ll be burning him!’ (p. 234)

Roddy, the forester, who is from Skye, does believe (he also thinks that Mrs Mitchison does, see p. 234), and is already afraid of Fred. He refuses to admit it, however, least of all to himself.

‘Superstition’ said Roddy, ‘plain bloody Highland superstition! You’d as well be seeing bloody fairies!’ If once he could get swearing at the thing right it might stop being there and he might manage to prevent himself from believing, because in another minute he would be doing just that – here, even here in the bar under the electric light, and he knowing how to drive and repair tractors or lorries and having at his tongue tip the Latin names of a hundred conifers! ‘Bloody superstition!’ he said again, half shouting it. But all round there was a nasty kind of hush. (p. 151)

‘All round’ are the men of Port Sonas in the bar, where the story is gaining accretions and embroideries.

‘[T]here was the queerest shaped parcels going to yon place [Kilmolue] ... They was, och, shaped wi’ legs on them!’ He began to see such a parcel in his mind’s eye, as his hearers looked at him with half belief, and his imagination woke further. ‘And sounds coming from them itself! Och, the most outrageous groanings and squeakings. And the string that parcelled them up not right string at all!’ ...

‘Away you go, Postie!’ said Alasdair, ‘there’s not a word of truth you’ve been telling us!’ (p. 152)

Nevertheless, Mitchison shows that some of the villagers do believe, or are ready to believe. How many of them believe, and how seriously? In leaving this question open she raises others. Is magic all in the mind, as in one possible reading of *The Bull Calves*? Can a spell only take effect if it is believed in? Mitchison has already used this theme in a fine early short story 'The Barley Field'.²⁶ Here the central character is an Early Bronze Age farmer whose envy of his neighbour's fine field of barley leads him to destroy the crop. Is his subsequent downfall due to spirits raised by the chief to avenge the destruction? The reader, entering into his mind, is given visible and audible evidence of that. Or are the manifestations due to his own sense of guilt? Mitchison, with elegant economy, suggests a scientific reason for the superior crop of barley. The Gods must be pleased with him, muses the successful farmer, 'although perhaps also it had been useful to dig deep ... a hand deeper than any of the others' ('The Barley Field', p. 14). No supernatural forces have been involved, and the central character's torment comes from within: he sees and hears the spirits because he believes in them.

Behind Roddy's panicky denial that magic exists at all seems to lie a conviction, or an attempt to be convinced, that if he does not believe in magic it cannot affect him. In such a context the case of the missionary's accident takes on a further dimension. If we think the *buidseachas*, Fred's charm, has anything to do with the missionary's falling downstairs – even if we allow it no power, but surmise that the shock of seeing it caused him to lose his footing – then the suggestion is that, under his Wee Free doctrines, he retains a belief in charms. Under the strictness of Sabbath observance and fundamentalist Christianity there is a reservoir of pagan belief.

Because of its deliberate distancing and ambiguity, *Lobsters on the Agenda* sheds little light on the question of whether Mitchison herself held such a belief. Her careful reply to the Mass-Observation directive on supernatural belief²⁷ maintains a similar distance: 'I take it as it comes', though a few lines later she says that she has had 'illness wished on her', as,

²⁶ NM, 'The Barley Field', *Barbarian Stories*, pp. 11-27.

²⁷ See Appendix III.

apparently, Fred wishes measles on the schoolmistress in *Lobsters on the Agenda* (pp. 232, 234-5). Her citation in the same document of a string of supernatural events in Carradale strengthens the impression given by her fiction that in her view the life of a community does include an element of the inexplicable, which is the essential quality of magic.

Yet it is clearly seen by the characters of *Lobsters on the Agenda* that magic does not sit well with the everyday machinery of village life. Roddy expresses the feeling in an outburst of baffled anger, designed by Mitchison to be simultaneously sincere and comical: '[I]t is not right, it is neither right nor fitting, for a man that's on the Port Sonas Village Hall Committee to be using sorceries and witchcraft!' (p. 163) This is the conflict between materialism and magic, between the rational and the irrational, which we find to be intrinsic in Mitchison's life. Chapter 7 will discuss how she teases at the problem in short stories through many years of her writing career.

CHAPTER 7

A continuing concern: short fiction

Land work and sea sleep,
Ill sleep and queer dreams:
Slack fishing till the moon changes:
Queer weather and queer thoughts.¹

Throughout her writing career, at irregular intervals among her novels, plays, children's books and non-fiction works, Naomi Mitchison published collections of short stories. Apart from some volumes intended for children, there are nine collections: *When the Bough Breaks* (1924), *Black Sparta* (1928), *Barbarian Stories* (1929), *The Delicate Fire* (1933), *The Fourth Pig* (1936), *Five Men and a Swan* (1957), *Images of Africa* (1980), *What do you think yourself?* (1982), and *A Girl Must Live* (1990). The anthology *Beyond This Limit* (1986) is a selection of novellas and short stories published from the 1930s to the 1980s. This chapter draws mainly on *The Fourth Pig*, *Five Men and a Swan*, *What do you think yourself?* and *A Girl Must Live*, spanning the period 1936-1990.

While some stories are realistic or quasi-realistic depictions of historical events or contemporary life, many, like Mitchison's novels, address the question of the interface between the material and the irrational, valuably expanding on the themes and ideas underlying her novels. Three stories particularly relevant to the topic are treated at some length in chapter 8 of this thesis. 'Mirk, Mirk Night' (*FP*, pp.259-89) is discussed in relation to Mitchison's recurrent fairy hill motif, and 'Five Men and a Swan' (*FMS*, pp. 93-110) and the uncollected story 'The Box' in relation to the swan maiden motif also frequently used in her work.

¹ From NM, 'Carradale Weather', *FMS*, pp. 132-3 (132).

It has been mentioned in the Introduction that an overview of Mitchison's novels, even if some are flawed, shows a process of development, predictable and desirable in an oeuvre covering some seventy years. An overview of her short fiction gives a different picture. The work does reflect development in her interests, so that, for instance, it is possible to speak of her African and science fiction short stories from the 1970s and 1980s, but, arguably, the level of literary accomplishment is high throughout her prolific production in this genre.² A perceived deterioration in some later Carradale stories is discussed below, but, in an overall view, powerful late stories are paralleled by equally accomplished early work, such as 'The Barley Field', discussed in chapter 6.

Isobel Murray, introducing her 1982 selection *Beyond This Limit*, writes of 'the author's doubts about stories written before 1930,' adding 'I didn't entirely share these doubts.'³ It may be suggested that a selection of Mitchison's best short stories would include stories from the 1929 collection *Barbarian Stories*, such as 'The Barley Field' and 'The Goat' (a foreshadowing of Shirley Jackson's 1949 story 'The Lottery'⁴, though more politically pointed), as well as 'Remember Me' from the 1982 collection *What Do You Think Yourself?* and the stories discussed in chapter 8, 'Five Men and a Swan' and 'The Box', which display interesting resemblances, though written at least ten to fifteen years apart.

While the main focus of this thesis is on Mitchison's 'Scottish period' during the 1940s and 1950s, it is appropriate to consider collections and individual stories published much later in her career. It is often difficult to assign a date of composition, or of original serial publication, to Mitchison's short stories, though where such details have been ascertained they will be

² The nine collections listed contain 121 short stories and novellas, but many remain uncollected.

³ Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', *Beyond This Limit* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press and Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1986), pp. vii-xix (xvii).

⁴ See Shirley Jackson, *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* (Raven Books, 1996), pp. 215-23.

supplied here.⁵ Some pieces in her later collections were written many years previous to book publication. The story 'Five Men and a Swan', for instance, first published in the eponymous collection of 1957, was in fact written in 1940 (*AYTN*, pp. 101-2). Some stories, on the other hand, are probably identifiable as having been not only published later but also written later in her career. Many of these late stories give evidence of a continuing interest in the supernatural and mythical themes which we have noted in the work of Mitchison's 'Scottish period', and are therefore considered here.

The evidence for placing them comparatively late in the chronology of Mitchison's writing is partly a matter of historical reference – for instance, the mention of television or the Cold War – and partly a question of 'voice'. It has been noted in discussion of Mitchison's novels that she frequently employs what Hugh Kenner calls the Uncle Charles Principle (see chapter 6), by which the narration is in the voice of a character: an eighteenth-century Haldane in *The Bull Calves*, a Carradale child in *The Big House*. Voice is particularly important in a short story, since there is generally only one narrator whose idiom and register must almost immediately set the tone of the story.

Mitchison is not uniformly successful in her use of this technique. The effect of some of the stories in *The Fourth Pig*, for instance, is somewhat vitiated by an uncertainty of voice evident when she writes in the persona of a working-class character or narrator, where she is perhaps not entirely at ease.

Now she was tired and her back ached real bad. Florrie her name was. There'd been a time when she and Ginger, her mother's lodger, had wanted to get married, before he was took bad, but they hadn't been able to afford that. ... That was before he got the job at the brickworks that had near killed him. He oughtn't to have took it, but there was nothing doing in his own job. No, she thought, I didn't ought to have let him take it. ('Frogs and Panthers', *FP*, p. 25)

Mitchison's move to the West Highlands in the late 1930s is marked by a considerable change not only in the settings and concerns but also in the

⁵ The formal acknowledgements in NM's collections generally do not specify which pieces have been previously published, let alone when or where.

language of her fiction. It has been noted in chapter 5 that she was early attracted by the 'soft voices' of the Carradale people (*SSP*, pp. 2-3) and soon began using this voice in her writing. 'I write very easily in Highland speech', she comments in 1940 about 'Five Men and a Swan' (*AYTN*, p. 102).

[H]e looked for a rock to hide behind, the way he could watch her closer when she came out ... as he knelt he put his hand onto a thing that was warm and soft, and he thought ah, it was the clothes of her he had and maybe he could be tricking her a wee bit. ('Five Men and a Swan', *FMS*, p. 95)

She uses this West Highland speech in *The Bull Calves*, where strictly speaking it is inappropriate, since the novel is set in Perthshire and the Highland characters are not from Kintyre. She is aware of this, and discusses it at some length in the notes to *The Bull Calves*.

[O]n the whole this book is in current West Coast speech, Kintyre speech – Carradale speech maybe – at any rate the kind of spoken Scots that comes most naturally to me. ... [I]f I had not been in constant touch with West Coast speech for the last five years I might not have felt I needed to write this book rather than another. If I had not worked day after day with West Highlanders, danced with them, quarrelled with them, loved them, cheated and been cheated with them, had we not been thirled to one another by common action, by kindness, by violent happiness and unhappiness, then I might have written some other book. (*BC*, pp. 409, 411)

Clearly this voice has more than academic significance to Mitchison, and, since it is so inextricably linked in her mind with West Highland life, it is a suitable medium for her novels set in West Highland villages, *The Big House* and *Lobsters on the Agenda*. It is the obvious choice too for her 'documentary' about herring fishing, *Men and Herring*, written in collaboration with the Carradale fisherman Denis Macintosh.

So they didna take the wheel at all, neither of them, but for all that they didna like to hear the Cruban miscalling Hamish, and all that about the nets on Barra was a long time back, and only half-true, the way it had been. ... In the end they got clear out of the loch, and there was a bit of a jabble on once they were out of the shelter of the land, and it was colder getting. (*MH*, p. 55)

Not all critics considered the adoption of this voice a good idea. The film-maker John Grierson, in his otherwise enthusiastic review of *Men and Herring*, was doubtful.

I am bothered because this Scottish writing of ours can get so deliberately and preciously local as to get silly. For it isn't only the men in the piece who talk Loch Fyne West Highland, but the narrative, for the most part, is accented too. [*as in the quote above.*]⁶

Grierson has a specific technical reason for his objection: '[A]ction narrative has to go with a clip, and for clip there is nothing like the Anglo-Saxon word, and damn the "ings" and the wee thises and the gey thats and all other verbal tinkleybobs' (p. 81). Another reviewer, equally uneasy, suggests a different reason.

Unfortunately it is written in a style which attempts what Grassie Gibbon succeeded in achieving in *Sunset Song*, the reproduction in narrative prose of the cadences of Scots speech, and here the attempt is not always fortunate. Sometimes the effect is not one of ease and immediacy, but rather of poverty of vocabulary and imagination. Can the reason be that this kind of style does not 'come natural' to Mrs Mitchison, as it certainly did to Grassie Gibbon?⁷

This is a shrewd hit, even if the reviewer seems to underestimate the degree of stylisation in Grassie Gibbon's narrative. But Gibbon's stylised written Scots does come from a background of natural spoken Scots, and that is not the case with Mitchison. While it is indeed a stylised form of Carradale speech which Mitchison uses, it is certainly not her natural idiom. She might claim, as in the notes to *The Bull Calves* already quoted, that it was 'the kind of spoken Scots that comes most naturally to me', but audio and video evidence is not lacking to indicate that the accents of Edwardian Oxford never left her. She is fluent enough in writing Carradale speech, but not with the fluency of a native speaker: there is certainly the occasional phrase which rings 'deliberately and preciously local', as Grierson says. Sometimes, too, she absent-mindedly allows a West Highland speaker to use a thoroughly English construction which did come naturally to her:

⁶ Grierson, p. 80.

‘We found the poor mother [a vixen] hurt ... so we brought her in – near dead, was she no’, Cod Eye? We fed her, for one couldn’t let her starve, but neither of us expecting she’d live ...’ (‘The Red Fellows’, *WDYTY*, pp. 35-41 (38))⁸

The comic rascal of a Highlander who is speaking here would never refer to himself as ‘one’, and the phrase sits most awkwardly between ‘was she no?’ and ‘but neither of us expecting she’d live’.

Particularly noticeable at times is Mitchison’s reliance on certain stock phrases to give the flavour of West Highland speech: ‘mostly’, ‘still and all’, ‘away different’, ‘what at all?’ It is an excessive use of such phrases, as if they are fixed elements of her Highland voice, which arguably makes it possible to date some of her stories to later in her writing career; perhaps, no longer in such close touch with Carradale speech, she has come to rely on them. (After the mid-1960s she was concentrating strongly on Botswana; see *RFH*, *passim*.) Examples of such awkward usages will be cited as they arise in discussion of her later short stories.

The short stories in which Mitchison employs or refers to supernatural and mythical themes may be allocated to three broad groups.

- 1) Retellings of fairy tales and myths, largely gathered in *The Fourth Pig* (1936), a collection from a period when Mitchison’s writing was perhaps at its most experimental: it is contemporary with her modernist works *We Have Been Warned* and *Beyond This Limit*, both published in 1935.
- 2) Treatments of the various manifestations of the irrational in which Mitchison has evinced interest throughout her life: for instance, ‘spirit of place’, the immanence of good and evil in inanimate objects, and the concept of the Mother Goddess.
- 3) Considerations of the disjunction possibly perceived by Mitchison, and in these stories certainly apparent to her protagonists, between

⁷ Alasdair Cheyne, ‘The Open Air’, *Scots Review*, 11 (May 1950), 32.

⁸ ‘The Red Fellows’ originally published *Scottish Short Stories 1974* (Collins, 1974), pp. 113-21.

‘magic’ and conditions in an increasingly technological modern world.

1. Retellings of fairy tales and myths

The fairy tales and myths in *The Fourth Pig* stand alone in Mitchison’s work. They are retellings of the classic fairy tales ‘The Fourth Pig’, ‘The Snow Maiden’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘Soria Moria Castle’ and ‘The Little Mermaid’, and of two episodes from, respectively, Greek and Teutonic myth, ‘Frogs and Panthers’ and ‘Brünnhilde’s Journey Down the Rhine’.

Mitchison was not the first writer, nor the first woman writer, to think of critiquing society in fairy tale format.

[W]omen fairy-tale writers of 19th-century Germany dealt with issues anticipatory of those women writers and feminists would treat in the last three decades of the 20th century. These issues include: voice and voicelessness; the commodification of women; gender relations; the importance of female education; a questioning of the redemption motif of marriage as women’s only salvation; and a series of other social malaises and gender inequities in patriarchy.⁹

It should be noted, however, that *The Fourth Pig*, nearly a century after these early feminist works, also appeared thirty-five years before ‘the last three decades of the 20th century’. At the time, and in Britain, Mitchison’s retold fairy tales appear both innovative and unique.

The literary retellings and reinterpretations of fairy tales by the writers who do eventually follow are considerably better known than Mitchison’s. Notable are the poems of Anne Sexton (*Transformations*, 1971), the short stories of Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979) and the poems of Liz Lochhead (*The Grimm Sisters*, 1981). The novels and stories of Margaret Atwood are generally based on fairy tales. The short story ‘Bluebeard’s Egg’ in the collection of that title (1983) is an obvious example, while *The*

⁹ SCJ [i.e. Shawn Jarvis], ‘Feminism and Fairy Tales’, in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 155-9 (156).

Handmaid's Tale (1986) is seen as a reworking of 'Little Red Riding Hood'.¹⁰

Most of these writers explore the psychological, frequently sexual, themes to be found in fairy tales. Mitchison has a different purpose, as noted by Jack Zipes:

There is always social commentary in her fantasy. ... All of the tales in [*FP*] are intended to provoke the reader to think about the social conditions of the Depression years and combine unique social commentary with traditional fairy-tale motifs.¹¹

A useful comparison can be made between Mitchison's version of 'Hansel and Gretel' and Anne Sexton's poem of that title in *Transformations*. Sexton's version is loaded with images of food and eating as metaphors for love.

Little plum,
said the mother to her son,
I want to bite,
I want to chew,
I will eat you up. ...
Your neck as smooth
as a hard-boiled egg;
soft cheeks, my pears ...¹²

Transformations is considered to arise largely from Sexton's own troubled psychology and family relationships.

Embedded in *Transformations* are newly disguised versions of Judith the cold mother ('Snow White'), Aunt Amy the witch of libido ('Rapunzel'), and Ace the seducing father ('Briar Rose/Sleeping Beauty').¹³

In contrast, Mitchison's 'Hansel and Gretel' (*FP*, pp. 83-102) looks outward to a world of economic injustice. The children live 'in Birmingham, just like you and me' (though Mitchison's laboured working-class voice

¹⁰ For discussion of Sexton, Carter and Atwood see *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, which has extensive bibliographies. For Lochhead see Robert Crawford and Anne Varty, eds., *Liz Lochhead's Voices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

¹¹ *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, p. 321.

¹² Anne Sexton, 'Hansel and Gretel', *Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 286-90 (286-7).

hardly maintains the illusion of solidarity), and are enticed by a capitalist witch to her big house built of gold and silver and papered with banknotes. Also attacked are such instances of economic slavery as the fur trade and child employment in the silk industry.

But how Billy and Minnie grew up, and how later on they went back to the witch's house, and how they and their friends killed the old witch – for she was still going strong – and made things so that she could never come back again to Birmingham or anywhere else, that's another story and I haven't time to tell it you to-day. (p. 102)

'Frogs and Panthers' (*FP*, pp. 15-39) is set in a part of England which is in the grip of unemployment, probably the Midlands again.¹⁴ The god Dionysos Bacchus and his servant Xanthias are transformed into the film star Denys Backhouse and the unemployed labourer Ginger.¹⁵ A job in the brickworks effectively kills Ginger, and the god wreaks a spectacular revenge on the factory owner, only stopping short of having him torn to shreds by panthers when a salt-of-the-earth workman protests '[T]his won't help and it's not what I'm used to and what we need is Unions for all and all in the Unions!' (pp. 35-6). In its very awkwardness and occasional bathos, the story illustrates Mitchison's recognition that England in the Depression is a long way from the golden age of the gods.

'Soria Moria Castle' (*FP*, pp. 109-35) takes its title from a Norse folktale. In Scandinavian thinking Soria Moria is a symbol of perfect happiness: the beautiful castle very far away, the end of a long quest, where the archetypal poor boy/youngest son wins the princess. In Mitchison's hands the story becomes an investigation into 'the nature and substance of ... reality' (p. 133) and how the modern world distorts original intentions. The narrator is inside a sandcastle which she herself has built: choosing objects from a witch's hand, she finds herself becoming in turn a grain of wheat which is made into a cake; a grape-seed which becomes wine; and a piece of

¹³ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: a Biography* (Virago, 1991), p. 337.

¹⁴ Dick Mitchison's unsuccessful election campaign in the area in 1931 (see *YMWA*, pp. 184-7) had already contributed scenes to *WHBW*.

¹⁵ It seems probable that Mitchison knew the term Xanthochroi, used by Thomas Huxley and other ethnologists to denote a racial group with fair hair and pale skin – redheads, in fact.

iron ore which becomes a gun. In each case the beneficial potential of the object is thwarted: for instance, hungry people cannot afford the cake and it goes to waste. Here Mitchison looks beyond the domestic economy to a wider human situation:

I only knew that everything should have been different and I knew also that the kind of castle that we build is from its foundations conditioned by the kind of person whom we have allowed ourselves to become. (p. 133)

In other stories the perspective is feminist. Mary Snow in 'The Snow Maiden' (*FP*, pp. 65-79) is good at mathematics and headed for university, but chooses love and marriage instead, and seems 'to melt away, to fade right out somehow': Mitchison's comment on a contemporary perception of women's role in life. In 'Brünnhilde's Journey Down the Rhine' (*FP*, pp. 243-52) the rather stilted Germanic voice does not disguise a feminist message:

He does not want speech with the woman whom [sic] I am, but rather possession of the woman whom he thinks he sees ... ('Brünnhilde's Journey Down the Rhine', pp. 245-6)

'The Little Mermaid' (*FP*, pp. 225-34) follows deceptively closely the familiar Hans Andersen story. The narrator is a conventional and obedient mermaid who stays safely in the sea and regards with horror her friend Dafnia's habit of 'mooning about by the edges', the habitation of man. As in the original story, Dafnia, 'different from the rest of us mermaids', rescues a drowning prince, falls in love with him, and goes on land in the hope that he will love her in return. Finally she is neither mermaid nor human, unable to be at home in either world. Mermaids are generally included in the category of otherworldly consorts which covers fairy lovers and animal brides, such as swan maidens.¹⁶ Mitchison's 'The Little Mermaid' may therefore be seen as a slightly earlier treatment of the theme of a supernatural being in a human

¹⁶ See Boria Sax, *The Serpent and the Swan* (Blacksburg, Virginia: McDonald and Woodward, 1998), particularly pp. 151-8 on 'The Little Mermaid'.

world which will be discussed in chapter 8 of this thesis in connection with 'Five Men and a Swan',

'The Fourth Pig' (*FP*, pp. 3-7), first published in 1935,¹⁷ a stark prophetic vision of World War II, may be compared with Mitchison's later story 'Remember Me' (*WDYTY*, pp. 93-106), which foresees the effects of nuclear war. Both are set apart from other stories in their respective collections by the fact that Mitchison has found a natural, flexible register for her narrative, grounded perhaps, like the stories themselves, in her personal horror of war – it is clear from her memoirs that she was greatly affected by World War I, in which so many of her generation died – and the deep convictions which she expressed not only in her writing but in work for pacifist and international causes over many years.

The narrator of 'Remember Me' has seen sickness and death follow a nuclear attack on the West of Scotland, while Pig Four has already experienced the onslaught of the Wolf:

And thus it comes, many times, that his slavering jaws crush down through broken arteries of shrieking innocents, death to the weak lamb, the merry rabbits, the jolly pigs ... ('The Fourth Pig', p. 3)

In considering 'Remember Me' a comparison may be made with Edwin Muir's poem 'The Horses', in which a contemporary speaker looks at a recognisable countryside devastated by 'the seven days war that put the world to sleep'¹⁸ – a pervasive fear in the world of the 1950s when Muir wrote his poem, and still a perceived threat when Mitchison wrote 'Remember Me'. The ending of 'The Horses' is one of tentative hope, as the 'strange horses' resume their long-accustomed role as working partners to man after the machines have failed. 'Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.' No such hope is seen or offered by Mitchison in either 'The Fourth Pig' or 'Remember Me'. Pig Four has seen death and destruction, yet fears there may be worse to come:

¹⁷ 'The Fourth Pig' originally published *Time and Tide*, 5 October 1935, 1395-6.

¹⁸ Edwin Muir, 'The Horses', *Collected Poems* (Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 246-7.

I can hear the padding of the Wolf's feet a very long way off in the forest, coming nearer. And I know there is no way of stopping him. Even if I could help being afraid. But I cannot help it. I am afraid now. ('The Fourth Pig', p. 7)

The narrator of 'Remember Me', already showing signs of radiation sickness, expresses a comparable fear.

I do not know how long we can go on ... [I]t is too soon to know what will happen either to the Community Council or to the children. Perhaps when we do know it will seem that we were still happy when we did not know. ('Remember Me', pp. 105-6)

2. Irrational events

The second group of Mitchison's short stories, in which she addresses her lifelong perception that the irrational lies behind and permeates everyday life, may be introduced by another piece in *The Fourth Pig*. 'Adventure in the Debateable Land' (FP, pp. 197-216), places a present-day narrator (first encountered in a taxi with her arms full of seven league boots and other fairy tale impedimenta) at the centre of a story drawing on at least half a dozen traditional tales. In its light quick narrative, moving from scene to scene with the unpredictability of a dream, and in its surreal quality, the story has much affinity with the contemporary novella *Beyond This Limit*, and with Phoebe's dream in *We Have Been Warned* (pp. 163-9) which in fact includes reference to the Debateable [sic] Land.

If, as previously noted, Phoebe has some claim to be identified with Mitchison, the unnamed narrator in 'Adventure in the Debateable Land' supplies clear clues to her identity. She visits her barrister husband Dick in his chambers: '... I began to explain, but when I began on the Debateable Land he said he must just finish these papers first', and drops in on her youngest children Lois, Avrion and Valentine in the nursery. The biographical details point deliberately to Mitchison, positioning her in a landscape of fairy tale and magic, as, this thesis suggests, she felt she was.

Meantime, themes such as the existence of a perceptible 'spirit of place' and the immanence of good and evil in inanimate objects are revisited in short stories written throughout her career.

'Orkney Story' (*WDYTY*, pp. 1-9) draws on legends of the spirits said to inhabit the Neolithic barrow of Maeshowe. In Mitchison's poem 'Ghosts at Narrachan' (quoted in chapter 5) the speaker addresses the spirits of an abandoned township, asking for their help in shaping a more equitable future, and in 'Orkney Story' a similar attitude is seen, at least among the educated, Latin-speaking monks. (There may be an element of elitism in Mitchison's view of the supernatural, to which we shall return.) The Orkney women scream in panic when they are brought into the barrow for refuge: what may be inside is, in their minds, worse than the Viking invaders. Father Ranolfus, however, has already acknowledged the supernatural help available. 'We are going among ghosts ... but it is only ghosts who can protect our precious things. Ghosts alone put fear on the ship brutes.' (p. 4) He speaks – perhaps prays – to the bones in the burial chamber, and the spirits of the barrow do indeed emerge and terrify the Vikings into flight.

It may be noted that Mitchison allows Father Ranolfus to baptise the bones, after which 'He [the spirit] will be happy. He will protect us.' (p. 6). Mitchison, never formally a Christian or affiliated to any organised religion, nevertheless seems to have accepted miracles to the same extent, and in much the same way, that she accepted magic. Her earlier story 'The Story of St Magnus' (*FMS*, pp. 26-30)¹⁹ also concerns a miracle, attributed (by the narrator, but apparently supported by Mitchison) to the saint. And as magic has its rules, so, she seems to have accepted, do miracles. Hence, in a synthesis of pagan and Christian belief, the spirit of Maeshowe, once it has been baptised, is securely on the side of the monks. Father Ranolfus (or Mitchison) appears to agree with the sentiment of John Buchan's poem 'Wood Magic', cited in chapter 2: 'Gods are kittle cattle, and a wise man honours them all'.

¹⁹ 'The Story of St Magnus' originally published *Scotland's Magazine*, 51 (February 1955), 54.

An equally vivid connection of past with present in a specified place is found in 'In the 'Plane' (*FMS*, pp. 86-91). The narrator is in a small five-seater plane (smaller than the planes now used on Highlands and Islands routes, but the casual atmosphere has survived). The source of this story may be located in a flight from Campbeltown to Renfrew made by Mitchison on 26 July 1945. In a diary entry Mitchison reports looking down on a sea of cloud:

It was so beautiful that I can never quite forget it. I kept on thinking about it all the time. It was an immense glittering alpine landscape with solid cliffs and hills that were so obviously snow that the slightest movement in them was snow shifting. We went smoothly, not on wings; I kept on wishing it would stop and let me walk.²⁰

The desire to walk on the cloud may owe something to a memory of Stella Benson's fantasy novel *Living Alone* (1919). In a chapter particularly admired by Mitchison, 'An Air Raid Seen From Above', the narrator explains: 'A cloud gives quite reasonable support to magic people, and most witches and wizards have discovered the delight of paddling knee-deep about those quicksilver continents'.²¹

In the story, as geographical indications in the text make clear, the flight is from Renfrew to Campbeltown. A glance at the map shows that the island they fly over, Eilean-na-Caileg [sic], the Island of the Maiden, is the Isle of Arran. As in the diary, Arran is blanketed by a sea of cloud, and the narrator sees something in the clouds, or the 'snow'.

I needed to keep on saying to myself that [the clouds] were not snow, so cold white and smooth they were, drifted deeply into the narrow glens. There was a kind of mark in the clouds, a series of dark blotches, very clear in the whiteness, coming down the main glen of Eilean-na-caileg where the cloud lay piled and still as winter drifts. ... They were foot prints coming down the white glen of clouds. ('In the 'Plane', pp. 87-8)

They are the prints of a girl and a deer, and they are seen by all the passengers, but no one will admit to seeing them except 'a stranger, an

²⁰ Calder, p. 190, quoting Mitchison's World War II diary.

Englishman he looked like, with ... a kind of case, like a Minister's, that had papers and books in it.' (p. 86) It is he who identifies the footprints as those of 'a daughter of Finn ... wooed by another of the Ossianic heroes' (p. 91). Mitchison is drawing here on the Celtic myth of the Fianna, the warrior clan associated in legend with many places in Ireland and Scotland, including Arran.²²

The mysterious figure with the briefcase, thought to be something to do with the Government – like the stranger in George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* (1972), and like that character not further explained – is worth noting because it is he, the educated man, who is most at ease with the phenomenon, as was Father Ranolfus in Maeshowe. Mitchison was not unmindful of her own intellectual powers, once declaring flatly 'I think myself more intelligent and far-sighted than most of my [Carradale] neighbours ... I am more educated, have wider tastes'.²³ We have seen that, though her formal education had been truncated by war and marriage, she was widely read, perpetually enquiring, and aware of the conflict when an educated and rational mind is presented with the apparently supernatural. Perhaps in these stories she is noting, though not exploring, this contradiction once again.

In 'Call Me' (*WDYTY*, pp. 47-53)²⁴ an inexplicable feeling of eeriness is evoked in the narrator by a very specific object, an old dolls' house. We may be reminded again of Mitchison's childhood terrors, sometimes aroused by furniture and household objects. The source of this story too can be identified: the dolls' house is Mitchison's own, originally made for her mother (the narrator in the story has inherited the house, via an aunt, from her grandmother). In Mitchison's childhood memoir *Small Talk* she recalls that 'as a literal-minded small girl, I was worried ... by the awkwardness of

²¹ Stella Benson, *Living Alone* (Macmillan, 1919), p. 133. For Mitchison's admiration of Benson's work see *YMWA* pp. 127-37, and NM's contribution to the symposium 'Neglected Fictions', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 October 1985, p. 1188.

²² See Helen McSkimming, 'Arran, isle of the apple trees', originally published *Dalriada* (1992). www.dalriada.co.uk

²³ NM, 'What to do with the Big House', p. 34.

²⁴ 'Call Me' originally published *Scottish Short Stories 1976* (Collins, 1976), pp. 187-96.

scale'. (p. 17) The narrator of 'Call Me' remembers the same feeling as a child: '[T]here was always one thing that I couldn't get out of my mind. That was the difference in sizes of the furniture.' ('Call Me', p. 47) In both memoir and story appear oversized Goan carved furniture, wooden kitchen utensils, an ivory commode.

In *Small Talk* the dolls' house is described with a cheerful briskness, even though 'alas, in the course of being played with, a lot of it has gone and almost all the Hubbard [doll] household, which is very sad'. (p. 17). For the adult Mitchison it has a further resonance. In an article of 1962 she describes its arrival at Carradale in a vanload of furniture and fittings from Oxford, where she has had to clear the house after her mother's death.

[A]ll the time I kept thinking about the dolls' house and various other things ... It is curious how so much of what I brought seems to have changed character with the move, to have become more cheerful, to have shed associations of boredom or repression or death ... We now have two rows of Perpetual [strawberries], small, dark red and tasting like strawberries used to when I first played with my dolls' house.²⁵

There is a mingling of nostalgia with memories which are not entirely happy. The title of the article is 'Ghosts Go North'. Perhaps these are the ghosts which find expression in 'Call Me', where the narrator feels the dolls' house to be haunted by an unexplained, unidentified presence which – in a twist fusing fantasy and science fiction – may prove to be herself.

Mitchison's interest in the figure of the Mother Goddess has been noted in connection with the novel *Lobsters on the Agenda*. The theme and its associated imagery are found in three short stories published many years apart. 'The Epiphany of Poieëssa', in the 1928 collection *Black Sparta* (pp. 242-69), has as its setting a temple of the goddess Hera, served by virgin priestesses. The chief priestess kills an unwanted suitor by hitting him with a statue of the goddess. Her use of that weapon is ironically presented; far from upholding the claims of the celibate life, Mitchison allows the priestess to elope with a more favoured suitor. Seeded throughout the story are symbols of the Mother Goddess: '[I]n one place the jagged slope of the cliffs was

broken by a small cleft wriggling snake-fashion up among the rocks ...' (p. 242)²⁶

Almost fifty years later Mitchison writes 'The Hill Modipe' (*WDYTY*, pp. 24-34).²⁷ The setting is Africa, but here again are traditional Goddess symbols: the twin-peaked hill with a spring between the peaks, and the snake. Mitchison links the mystic snake with that other water spirit, the Loch Ness monster, in a fine illustration of the affinity which, as we have seen, she found to exist between Scottish and African belief systems.

Later still (in terms of publication) is 'Telling to the Master' (*AGML*, pp. 67-73), Mitchison's most overt treatment of a matriarchal religion since 'The Epiphany of Poieëssa'. A young priest makes a long journey north from a place of great stones to a place of cup-marked rocks by the western sea (perhaps from Stonehenge or Avebury to Kilmartin in Argyll?). Here the symbols are sometimes clearly identified: 'the rising of the delicate new moon, out of the notch between two black hills, the Lady reborn' (p. 68), and sometimes less explicit but no less clearly identifiable:

At each side the heavy, thick marten and beaver furs brushed softly, intimately, against his arms. He moved closely along them, knowing that the opening would come and he would pass through it ... The fur curtains revealed an entrance; he pushed gently. There was the roof post, the shelterer, the strong one. ('Telling to the Master', p. 67)

3. Magic and the modern world

The third group of short stories comprises those with West Highland settings, some dating from her early years in Carradale and some from considerably later in her career, in which the narrator or the characters express themselves ill at ease with the concept of magic in the modern world.

It is not a problem confined to the Highlands or to the late twentieth century. In essence if not in detail, the complaint is that of the seventeenth-century clergyman Richard Corbet in his 'The Fairies' Farewell'.

²⁵ NM, 'Ghosts Go North', *New Statesman*, 64 (1962), 360.

²⁶ See Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (Thames and Hudson, 1989) for a full account of traditional Goddess symbols, though her identification of such symbols in so many locations is thought rather over-enthusiastic by some archaeologists.

Farewell, rewards and fairies,
 Good housewives now may say,
 For now foul sluts in dairies
 Do fare as well as they.
 And though they sweep their hearths no less
 Than maids were wont to do,
 Yet who of late for cleanliness
 Finds sixpence in her shoe? ...²⁸

Corbet's speaker (and Kipling's fairies in the short story 'Dymchurch Flit', which draws on the poem)²⁹ attribute the modern world's hostility to fairies to the new reformed religion. Mitchison herself, in her short story 'Grand-daughter' (*FP*, pp. 51-8), makes a different suggestion. 'Grand-daughter' may be regarded as an essay in science fiction, since it looks back from two generations ahead of the time of writing ('Last week I was looking through some of the political books of the nineteen-thirties. It is queer reading those old books now ...'). By the (notional) mid-twentieth century magic has lost its place in society.

His wife, my grandmother, was very much laughed at for saying that the industrial revolution destroyed magic ... It was plain to her that play of any kind must have been exceedingly ill-thought-of ... Magic was one step beyond play. And so the whole idea of magic had become immoral ... [It] must at best go underground. ('Grand-daughter', pp. 52-3)

This is, more or less, the situation in the actual mid-twentieth century when Mitchison begins to write short stories rooted in West Highland folklore and tradition. Magic has largely gone underground; yet, as is clear from her reply to the Mass-Observation directive of 1942, it is still around. 'There have been several occurrences [of second sight] here. ... There are various brounies about.'³⁰ With the introduction of electricity and mains water, and later television, previously unimaginable changes are taking place in West

²⁷ 'The Hill Modipe' originally published *Scottish Short Stories 1975* (Collins, 1975), pp. 162-75.

²⁸ Richard Corbet, 'The Fairies' Farewell'. The full poem is at <http://oldpoetry.com>

²⁹ Rudyard Kipling, 'Dymchurch Flit', *Puck of Pook's Hill and Rewards and Fairies*, ed. by Donald Mackenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 147-58. [From *Puck of Pook's Hill*, originally published 1906]

³⁰ See Appendix III.

Highland life. Can second sight and brounies co-exist with these modern amenities? More disturbingly, should they? This is the question which Mitchison, through the characters in her short stories, attempts to tease out.

Not all the stories based on West Highland folklore can be classed with Mitchison's best work. This is sometimes due to the question of voice discussed earlier in this chapter, and sometimes perhaps to the fact that the experience behind the story is not Mitchison's own (unlike, for instance, the sight of the snowy clouds which inspired 'In the Plane'). In these cases it would seem that she is not sufficiently engaged with the anecdote for a fully satisfactory story to result. Such an air of second-hand experience hangs about 'The Sea Horse' (*WDYTY*, pp. 16-23), of which Mitchison writes: 'The basis for this story is something which (perhaps) happened in my Skye daughter-in-law's family'.³¹ The sea horse is a kelpie, in this case linked with the destiny of a family, and is nothing like so numinous or so alarming as the kelpies in *We Have Been Warned*, which, as suggested in chapter 3, seem to come directly from Mitchison's own nightmares.

'Out of the West' (*AGML*, pp. 55-9)³² features a somewhat lacklustre and sketchily drawn mermaid. (The story was first published in a special Highlands and Islands issue of the periodical *New Saltire* and just possibly written to order.) The Highland voice, almost a caricature, is in danger of slipping into Mitchison's own idiom, with the 'one' construction previously noted:

[M]ost of us some way have always half behaved ourselves. One is feared to do the very thing one wants most. And besides, one can get that fond of a lassie that it is more pleasure to do the leastest thing she wants than to have one's own way. It is queer, that. ('Out of the West', p. 58)

'Should we believe Postie?' (*WDYTY*, pp. 79-83), turning on archaeoastronomy and the powers of standing stones, is probably attributable

³¹ Note by NM in *Modern Scottish short stories*, ed. by Fred Urquhart and Giles Gordon (Hamish Hamilton, 1978), pp. 209-10. The 'Skye daughter-in-law' is Lorna Martin, who married NM's son Avrion in 1957; see Calder, p. 213. 'The Sea Horse' originally published *Scottish Review* 6 (Spring 1977), 29-35.

³² 'Out of the West' first published *New Saltire*, 7 (March 1963), 33-5.

to the late 1960s or early 1970s. The character Archie's admission that the proof of his theory 'is all in figures and difficult ones at that' (p. 83) seems to refer to Alexander Thom's innovative and slightly controversial writing on the subject.³³ The story is a slender anecdote bulked out by over-leisurely, ersatz Highland chat.

'The Black Jacket' (*WDYTY*, pp. 10-15), on the theme of telepathy, may have its source in a Carradale experience (see Appendix III), but, if so, it is Denis Macintosh's brother's friend's experience, not Mitchison's own, and she is uncomfortable in the persona of the narrator. The story, like 'Should we believe Postie?', takes up the question of magic in modern life, but Mitchison's narrator is looking so far back – from the present day to before World War I – that the narration tips over into a gentle meditation on 'the old days', losing relevance and atmosphere.

'The Castle' (*FMS*, pp. 134-9)³⁴ is another story which strikes the reader as less than satisfactory, though it was first published in 1956, within a prolific period of Mitchison's Scottish writing, when she was still engaged with Carradale and attuned to the local voice. The problem in this case lies elsewhere. The story deals with second sight (as do two further stories, 'In the Family' and 'The Warning', discussed later in this chapter). In 'The Castle', young Maggie proves to have inherited the gift, very much against her will. She is one of the characters who feel that magic and the modern world should not co-exist. Though ostensibly the central character, Maggie, with her nylons and high heels and impatience with her grandmother, is not shown as particularly attractive; Mitchison's sympathies seem to be with the old lady.

'It used to be said,' explains Granny, '... that whenever the Castle is threatened in any way, then something will be seen. In both the wars there was Germans seen. ... And a son killed in each war.' ('The Castle', p. 138) She herself, when in service there, has experienced this phenomenon.

'[S]uddenly I saw that where there had been empty green grass the whole lawn was full of wee fairies ... There were horses and coaches

³³ For instance Alexander Thom, *Megalithic Lunar Observatories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

³⁴ 'The Castle' originally published *Saltire Review*, 3 (Autumn 1956), 13-17.

among them and some of them had the queerest hats, kind of wound round their heads and skinkling with diamonds and rubies. They seemed some way to be dark in the skin and the lass-fairies had long shawls over their heads and all in the brightest, bonniest colours I had ever seen. And by the look on their faces they were gey pleased. And yet, for all it was so bonny there was something terrible about it ... [I]t appeared that these were not ordinary fairies but wee Indians ... and the son of the house was out in India ... [A]nd in a while after they got word that the son had been killed by the Indians that very day I had seen the fairies.' (pp. 137-8)

Maggie, now a nanny at the Castle, is at last persuaded to reveal that she too has seen something.

'And what were they like now? [probes Granny] And what would they be carrying, now? Would it be guns, now?'

'No,' said Maggie, half choking. 'No! Not guns. It was – wee kind of suit cases. And cameras. And golf clubs. Like folks that – that are coming to stay at some kind of grand hotel!' (p. 139)

There is something unsatisfactory to the reader about this ending. Mitchison, combining fantasy with social concern (as in the fairy tales in *The Fourth Pig*), is suggesting that the contemporary trend of converting stately homes into hotels is as much a threat to the Castle as the wars and mutinies of the past. She may well be writing tongue in cheek, but still the revelation about the wee suitcases and golf clubs has an air of bathos, not quite fitting with the story as a whole.

The basic anecdote – employee sees fairies at Castle – occurs again, briefly mentioned, in 'In the Family' (*FMS*, pp. 149-59).

His father ... had a wee glimpse of the fairies one time; he was under-keeper at the Castle ... and as he came down by the back road the fairies were riding round the Castle, wee dark folk on white ponies with a glitter of gold on the bridle. But he held his tongue about it, for it is not an under-keeper's place to be seeing the fairies belonging to the Castle ones. (p. 150)

Thus two stories in the same collection touch on the same alleged phenomenon. Clearly Mitchison felt that this anecdote was story material, and she has made two attempts to use it. In one case, however, it is mentioned only incidentally, and in the other the story does not quite work. The source

can in fact be identified, and comparison with the stories may suggest what has gone wrong.

The castle is identified by Mitchison in her reply to the 1942 Mass-Observation directive as Torrisdale Castle, south of Carradale.

The mother of my best friend here [in Carradale], as a girl, was housemaid at Torrisdale and saw some wee Indian fairies on the lawn, very pleased about something. The master of the house who had his money in India died elsewhere – soon after.³⁵

The anecdote is given in an expanded form in the (sadly fragmentary) memoirs of the ‘best friend’ in question, the Carradale fisherman Denis Macintosh. He describes the crew yarning in the fo’c’sle of a fishing boat kept in harbour by bad weather. The talk turns to ghost stories.

[My father] said the same sort of thing happened to his own wife before she was married. She was a kitchen maid in the big castle and she happened to look out of a large window which overlooked a lawn. The grass was packed with Indians and they were nodding and smiling to each other. They wore peaked hats like the ones women use for straining jelly, and all along the winding drive were black funeral coaches. She saw it all for about a minute ... [A] telegram arrived saying that the owner of the castle had died; he had made millions of pounds in India and these were the natives who were killed with hard work and who were paid with a handful of rice.³⁶

The description is quite as vivid as that in the published versions, and one can well see how the yarn would have caught Mitchison’s imagination. Denis Macintosh, however, brings in a note of social comment (‘he had made millions of pounds ... [and the natives] were paid with a handful of rice’). This, we may surmise, held overtones for Mitchison regarding the problem of social equality – the position of the laird – which troubled her throughout her life and acquired particular meaning for her in Carradale.

Yet this aspect does not fully transfer into the published versions of the anecdote. It is touched on in ‘In the Family’ with the remark that seeing the Castle fairies ‘is not an under-keeper’s place’. The thoroughly modern Maggie in ‘The Castle’ has discarded that attitude, having ‘no respect at all

³⁵ See Appendix III.

for her ladyship' (p. 134). Thus Maggie would not (and Granny does not) draw the moral which is evident in Denis Macintosh's original yarn. We are not informed that the family's wealth comes from exploiting natives in India. The detail remains in Granny's story that the Indians are 'gey pleased' (in the source, 'nodding and smiling to each other'), but the reason for their pleasure, their *schadenfreude* at the death of their oppressor, has been mislaid. The message which replaces it, about big houses being converted into hotels, is much less cogent – one form of capitalism, after all, is being replaced by another – and much less convincing to the reader. Even by 1956 Mitchison is beginning to address the question of the incongruity of magic with the modern world, and this theme does not entirely fit with the theme of the original anecdote: that is why 'The Castle' as a story does not fully succeed.

By the time of 'What do you think yourself?', the title story of her 1982 collection (*WDYTY*, pp. 62-8),³⁷ Mitchison is ready to foreground the question of magic in the twentieth century. There is a link with her long-standing perception that the travelling people or tinkers (such as Ian and Dina Townsley in *The Big House*) retain a connection with the other world. In 'What do you think yourself?' the supernatural events attending a routine car journey occur after the narrator, a Kintyre farmer, has moved a tinker family off his land.

[W]hen I told the tinkers to move on I did it with courtesy ... 'Mr Townsley,' I said – and that to a tinker right enough! – 'I'll be obliged if you will move on' and when the man gave me a cross look, did I answer it? Not at all ... (p. 62)

Soon afterwards, setting out on a business trip from Kintyre to Glasgow, he passes 'a Ferguson tractor with one of these big scoops standing up from the back of it'. Flying around the tractor are two fantastic birds which are snapping off lengths of telegraph wire with their beaks to build their nest in the scoop.

³⁶ Denis Macintosh, *Memories of a Fisherman* (Campbeltown, n.d.), p. 8.

³⁷ 'What do you think yourself?' originally published *Scottish Short Stories 1973* (Collins, 1973), pp. 23-31.

As the tractor went by slowly I had a good look at the driver. I had it in mind to call out to him, but when he was coming around the near bend I saw he had a look of one of the tinkers, that same kind of orange hair and the same thrawn look I'd seen on Townsley. Best leave well alone, I thought ... (p. 63)

He also sees some kind of water creature in the sea-loch – this one reminiscent, in its slimy menace, of the kelpies in *We Have Been Warned* – and later, as he changes a wheel, unseen little people hide his wheel-nuts. To use one of Mitchison's stock Highland phrases, what at all is going on?

In the brightly lit main street of the small town he drives through, the narrator can convince himself that he is imagining things. Back at home it is more difficult. He is uncertain whether to blame the tinkers: 'Was it then the people of the road having some say in it? Or was it nothing at all to do with them?' (p. 68) He finds little comfort in either alternative.

Was it more likely that I just happened to have the luck (though that maybe is not the word for it) to see farther through than most? But there again is an awkward notion, it is indeed, for it would mean that such things are constantly happening and ourselves not aware of them except sometimes. (p. 68)

From these stories and from Mitchison's other Highland fiction, we receive the impression that in the older Highland world, indeed, 'such things [were] constantly happening'. What seems to have changed is that people then were not only 'aware of them' but accepted them. Now, among the sudden and radical changes in Highland life brought by modern technology, such acceptance is no longer so easy, perhaps no longer possible. The altered attitudes as seen by Mitchison are set out clearly in her two stories of second sight, 'In the Family' and 'The Warning'.

Belief in second sight – visions, while the seer is awake, of future events – is endemic in the Highlands,³⁸ and Mitchison encountered it early in her Carradale years. It is an element of a 1940s poem, 'Submarine in Carradale Bay'.

The dark shape wallows under an arch of stars.

³⁸ Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, pp. 45-66.

Water-cat, purring through our civilian night:
Are you staring at us on shore, as from behind bars
Of fear and threat, once, Jessie Ban with the sight
Peered about at her neighbours, putting on bad luck,
No fault of theirs or her own, but through some fate's twist? ...³⁹

Mitchison understands, and specifies in her Mass-Observation response, that the 'gift' of second sight is unsought by its possessor and unwelcome to him or her, as well as arousing fear and distrust in others: 'Those who have it even slightly find it very unpleasant and don't want to talk about it'.⁴⁰ This perception is general in the Highlands.

Many people tend to think that possession of second sight is a gift, in that the ability to foretell future events can be turned to some material advantage of some significance. Instead, this seemingly advantageous character of the gift never seems to materialise: the gift, if such it is, is more regarded as an affliction than something beneficial either to seer or those seen.⁴¹

This is not confined to the Highlands. In Rudyard Kipling's Sussex story 'Simple Simon', Simon's aunt is a descendant of Widow Whitgift who helps the fairies in the earlier story 'Dymchurch Flit', and has benefited – or otherwise – from Puck's promise that 'there was always to be one of [the Whitgifts] that could see farther through a millstone than most'.

'My Aunt she knew what was comin' to people. My Uncle being a burgess of Rye, he counted all such things odious, and my Aunt she couldn't be got to practise her gifts hardly at all, because it hurted her head for a week afterwards.'⁴²

That unfavourable view of second sight is taken for granted in the opening lines of 'In the Family' (*FMS*. pp. 149-59).⁴³ This is one of Mitchison's earlier Carradale stories, first published in 1947.

It was in the family to be seeing things that are not meant to be seen.
And it was not nice for them, not at all. They could have done without
seeing the most of what they saw. ('In the Family', p. 149)

³⁹ NM, 'Submarine in Carradale Bay', *Scots Magazine*, 39 (1943), 199.

⁴⁰ See Appendix III.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, p. 45.

⁴² Kipling, 'Simple Simon', *Puck of Pook's Hill and Rewards and Fairies*, pp. 369-83 (375-6). [From *Rewards and Fairies*, originally published 1910]

⁴³ 'In the Family' originally published *Scots Magazine*, 48 (1947), 189-97.

The phenomenon in 'In the Family' proves to be benign in character. The gift in this particular family is explained as a consequence of an ancestor's dealings with the fairies, like the Widow Whitgift's dealings with Puck. Because of this long-ago friendship, a fairy woman supplies young Angus with the information which enables him to hijack a forestry lorry and remove his girlfriend from the locus of a prophesied accident.

Mitchison's view of second sight seems to have darkened by the time she writes 'The Warning' (*WDYTY*, pp. 42-6). Published in 1982, thirty-five years after the first appearance of 'In the Family', this can be identified with confidence as having also been written later, partly because television, first seen in Scotland in the early 1950s, is now an accepted part of life even in the Highlands.

Nowadays there is maybe not just the same drinking and the troubles that go with that, since we have other ways of amusing ourselves; though for myself I cannot find the same ploy in sitting in front of a dead box, whatever pictures it may be showing. (p. 42).

If these two stories are compared, the deterioration in voice discussed earlier is clearly seen. The narration of young Angus's experiences in 'In the Family' has a poetic simplicity:

[The fairy woman] began to walk by his side and he saw that there was no movement of her feet under the green cloak and for a while he could not anyways listen to what she was saying, the way the blood was pouring in spate through him and the sweat standing out on his forehead and the greatest fear at him lest she should reach out her hand and touch his own. (p. 152)

The narrator in 'The Warning' tells his equally alarming tale (of a phantom funeral, a common type of manifestation⁴⁴) in a lumpen, tabloid-style way.

It was a young student climbing on the hill that fell and broke his back and died while his chums were bringing him down. Aye, it was down the wee glen they came right enough, just as he had seen them. And

⁴⁴ See Thompson, *Supernatural Highlands*, pp. 73-4. Cf also Neil Gunn's novel *Second Sight* (Faber and Faber, 1940).

brought the corpse into the police station as was only proper and right. Aye, it was in the papers right enough the next day, and our township a namely place. (p. 44)

Yet perhaps the deterioration of voice corresponds with and mirrors a deterioration in belief. In both stories, the narrator is not the character with the gift of second sight, but an onlooker: his narrative role is to transmit the local community's view on the matter. By 'The Warning' this view has changed slightly. The narrator of 'In the Family' is aware of counter-pressures, but retains a body of traditional belief. Given the use of the pronoun 'you', it is probable that he speaks for the villagers.

You may know well enough that something has happened. But gin the Kirk is against it, and the schools, and the newspapers and the wireless forby, you will find it hard enough to believe your own eyes and ears. (p. 150)

The spokesman in 'The Warning' is more definite in his opinion that there is 'no such thing as the Sight', because it is 'not modern'. When his wife reports an occurrence of the Sight, the speaker is, in fact, resentful: 'It is not right that these things should happen nowadays and to folk one knows.' (p. 43)

The seer of the phantom funeral in 'The Warning' expresses again the established view that the gift brings no happiness to its possessors: 'It is a dreadful thing to have the Sight. Nobody knows except those that have had it.' (p. 46) His misery, however, is exacerbated by another element: he is the local policeman, and he feels that his position is in conflict with his gift. If he were to foresee a murder and warn his superior officers, he would not be believed, because 'The police is modern' and second sight is not.

And when he put it like that I could see as plain that it was not easy. 'You would know unofficially' I said, 'But you could not be believed officially.'

'That is it' he said 'I am caught, just! A terrible thing for a policeman. Terrible altogether.' (p. 45; the punctuation is Mitchison's)

The young man of 'In the Family' finds a similar difficulty in telling his boss the forester that he has hijacked a lorry because of a fairy's warning. But

the forester shares the Highland belief in fairies, as does the forester Roddy in *Lobsters on the Agenda*. Both these characters may be based on her friend the Carradale forester Duncan Munro (see *AYTN*, *passim*), a figure from the relatively idyllic phase of her Carradale life. The pessimistic tone of the comparatively late story 'The Warning' may reflect Mitchison's disillusionment with Carradale by then.

The foregrounding of the conflict felt by the policeman between his gift and his official position may also speak again of the conflict in Mitchison's own mind. The opposition between rational and irrational is now polarised further by what she sees – and makes her characters see – as the incongruity of magic, even in a Highland village, alongside such 'modern', eminently rational elements as television and an organised police force. Barbara Rieti, researching in Newfoundland during the 1980s, found very similar views:

Changes are crystallized by attributing the fairies' disappearance to modern devices or conditions, as when Mrs Keough blames cars, Mr Ryan lights and bustle, Mrs Kavanagh crowds, Mrs Ford roads, or Mrs Maloney television.⁴⁵

But Mitchison's characters mirror her own experience. In spite of their doubts, they still see and hear inexplicable things. The irrational, though denied, is still there.

Mitchison's short stories as a whole have another quality worth considering. Most of them appear at first reading to be almost carelessly written. They often open in colloquial or casual style:

Cause was, mostly the hand of God on us at Irvine in Ayrshire, and partly that before this, we had an old Minister, one that was diligent enough in small works, yet we had no good discourses out of him. ('A Burgess of Irvine', *FMS*, pp. 56-66 (56))

The endings can be disconcertingly abrupt and banal:

Though it is the Jean lassie will have been most hurt and for no fault of her own. But that is the way of it. ('Round with the Boats', *FMS*, pp. 117-23 (123))

⁴⁵ Rieti, *Strange Terrain*, p. 210.

In such points, and in their loose structure and often garrulous narration, Mitchison's stories do not follow the 'rules' of short story construction: the rules, that is, of the literary short story.

They are, however, reminiscent of another kind of story: that rooted in oral tradition, told, as the cliché has it, round the peat-fire. The critic Walter Benjamin observes in the mid-twentieth century that 'the gift of storytelling ... is becoming unravelled at all its ends'.

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. ... It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.

He laments 'We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story", which has removed itself from oral tradition.'⁴⁶

Mitchison's short stories, in that sense, have not evolved. Approving as she does the values of traditional communities, first in Scotland and then in Africa, she carries into her short stories, no doubt deliberately, the idiosyncracies and cadences of the storytelling which was part of community life.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), pp. 83-109 (91-3).

CHAPTER 8

Myth, reality and Naomi Mitchison

Few have seen the King Selkie and few the grand
Sweep of the wings as the Queen Swan comes to land,
In the long light days of summer when florrish is sweet on the bough,
Seeking their island mates between the machair and plough. ...¹

It has been suggested in the course of this thesis that a complex relationship exists between Naomi Mitchison's writing and her life, and that her central female characters, strong women who all in greater or less degree have supernatural or paranormal powers, may to some extent be identified with her. This chapter considers whether a similar relationship or identification may be traced in the cases of two motifs from myth and folklore which recur throughout Mitchison's writing: the fairy hill and the swan maiden.

The fairy hill

The recurrence of the fairy hill motif in Mitchison's work has been commented on by Douglas Gifford. The reference is to the moment in *The Bull Calves* when William sees the American Indian woman Ohnawiyo as 'the same as the fairy woman that could have been watching among the birches of Knocknasidhe beyond Borlum' (p. 275). (Knocknasidhe, one of several possible spellings for the Gaelic phrase which literally means 'hill of the fairies', is frequently found as a place-name.)

It's fascinating at this point to recall how this theme has been germinating in Mitchison's work. Her diaries frequently quote the passages of Thomas the Rhymer ballads which refer to the green road

¹ From NM, 'The Boar of Badenoch and the Sow of Athol', CK, p. 34.

winding up Ferniebrae [sic]; her returns to Cloan were often described in these terms; and there is in her novels like *The Corn King* the world where ordinary laws don't apply, the 'other landscape' of Neil Gunn. ... Ohnawiyo ... takes [William] back to an ancestral memory of a Highland innocence; perhaps a false memory, but potent as archetype ... [T]he fairies of the Ballads and real folk lore, together with brownies and kelpies and silkies, were archetypes of a part of the human mind which lay between Good and Bad, in a neutral, amoral, and therefore far less complicated world ... Think what we may [about the supernatural], we must appreciate Mitchison's vision, which sees the 'fairy hill' as a kind of short-hand, ancestral term for a level of consciousness which is of the past, perhaps part of the 'collective unconscious' or racial memory.²

The small green hillocks known as fairy hills have been mentioned in chapter 5. The tradition is strong in the West Highlands of Scotland. Since Mitchison first uses the fairy hill myth in a story and a poem in *The Fourth Pig* (1936), she may have encountered it during the holidays at Craignish (1930-31) mentioned in chapter 3. Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, Gaelic songs and prayers from the Western Highlands and Islands, includes many songs 'heard in fairy mounds' (a human who hears the music from a fairy hill can sometimes reproduce the tune), and extensive notes on the associated stories.³ Relations between humans and the inhabitants of the hills can be friendly, but the fairies are apt to abduct humans, sometimes for their services as pipers or midwives, sometimes, as will be seen, because of sexual attraction. Once inside the hill, and especially if he has taken food or drink or accepted a gift, the only chance for a human to escape comes on Hallowe'en, after seven years or a multiple of that number.⁴

The stories are not confined to the West Highlands. 'There is scarcely a district of the Highlands without its fairy knoll,' writes Carmichael, introducing the Scottish evidence in Wentz's survey of Celtic fairy lore.⁵ The hill in Aberfoyle from which the Reverend Robert Kirk was spirited away to

² Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', pp. 230-1.

³ Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, ed. by C.J. Moore (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997). See in particular poems 500-31 and notes pp. 663-70. [Originally published in 6 vols, 1900-71.]

⁴ See McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, particularly I, and Henderson and Cowan, *passim*, for further details.

fairylane has been mentioned in chapter 5. Mitchison in her childhood knew of one near Cloan, the Terra Navis, 'a ship-shaped moraine at the foot of the Ochils' (BC, p. 510), which was respectfully avoided during farming operations, as is customary with fairy hills. (As noted in chapter 5, the hills are often in fact prehistoric burial mounds.)

I doubt if anyone has ever put a spade into it; in my childhood, at least, it would have been commonly supposed that anyone so daring as to attempt it might have met the owners of the hill coming out of the turf to make their protest. (BC, p. 511)

The wide distribution of such traditions is further attested to by much material collected by the School of Scottish Studies in the University of Edinburgh, from Orkney and Shetland as well as the Highlands and Islands.⁶ Fairy hill traditions are also prevalent in Ireland. Lady Gregory devotes a chapter in her collection of folklore from the west of Ireland⁷ to 'forths and sheogeuy places'.

When as children we ran up and down the green entrenchments of the big round raths, the lisses or forths, of Esserkelly or Moneen, we knew they had been made at one time for defence, and that is perhaps as much as is certainly known ... Had we asked questions of the boys who led our donkeys they would in all likelihood have given us from tradition or vision, news of the shadowy inhabitants, the Sidhe, whose name in the Irish is all one with a blast of wind, and of the treasures they guard. (p. 255)

Wentz refers in passing to the Sioux tradition of a spirit-haunted hill near the Whitestone River, 'the Mountain of Little People'⁸, and a Cheyenne myth tells how Arrow Boy found the tribe's sacred medicine bundle within a magic mountain.

As [the boy] approached a wooded slope, a stone rolled aside to reveal an entrance and he passed through it into the earth ... [He] found

⁵ Wentz, pp. 84-116.

⁶ See the School's journal *Tocher*, passim. There is a particularly good selection of stories in 'A Host of Fairies', *Tocher*, 28 (1978), 193-226.

⁷ Lady (Augusta) Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the west of Ireland*, 2nd edn (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1970). See in particular chapter XIV, pp. 255-73. [Originally published 1920.]

⁸ Wentz, p. 237.

himself in a group of medicine men ... in a chamber dimly lit by magical fire.

The boy spends four years in the mountains 'learning magic and prophecy' (like Thomas the Rhymer) before he is allowed to leave with the medicine bundle and save his tribe from famine.⁹

Given such a widespread tradition, the occurrence of fairy hills in literature is perhaps to be expected. Pook's Hill, the home of Puck in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), is by definition a fairy hill. The children ask old Hobden to smoke out a wasps' nest in the fern on Pook's Hill, but he refuses. On Midsummer Day (he has made the connection, if they have not) unseen creatures buzzing in the fern are probably nothing so mundane as wasps.

'It's too early for wops-nestës, an' I don't go diggin' in the Hill, not for shillin's,' said the old man placidly.¹⁰

This is the same respect that Mitchison found to be accorded to the Terra Navis in Strathearn.

Neil Gunn's young hero Finn in *The Silver Darlings* knows about 'music coming through Knocshee, the fairy hill', among other supernatural manifestations in his countryside.¹¹ The piper in *The Big House*, like others, is invited into the hill because of musical skill.

'... I was over on the far side with my pipes, playing at a wedding, and coming back with the drink in me. Then, at Knocnashee, the Fair People stopped me on my road, and asked me to come in and play for them, and I, being a wee bit past my right senses with the drink, went in and played.' (BH, pp. 26-7)

George Mackay Brown in his radio play *A Spell for Green Corn* makes something much darker and deeper of this well-known story, linking it with chthonic powers of fertility. A seventeenth-century Orkney sheriff is just as

⁹ Steve Eddy, *Native American Myths* (Teach Yourself Books, 2001), pp. 37-8.

¹⁰ Rudyard Kipling, 'Cold Iron', *Puck of Pook's Hill and Rewards and Fairies*, pp. 185-99 (199). [*Rewards and Fairies* originally published 1910]

¹¹ Gunn, *The Silver Darlings*, p. 189.

doubtful about music heard from the Trowieknowe as Mitchison's twentieth-century Kate Snow, in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, is about Fred Macfie's magic.

SHERIFF: It was a still morning of thick fog, was it not? ... Is it not a fact of your experience that in a fog sights and sounds tend to be deceptive? ... [I]n a fog it may be difficult to discover the source of a sound ... And yet you state positively that the fiddle music came from *inside the knoll*. Is it not more likely that your senses were deceived, and that Storm Kolson was playing his fiddle near at hand, though hidden from you by the fog?

But the witness replies 'My Lord, the music came from inside the Trowieknowe. That I swear.'¹²

Yet none of these writers returns to the theme of the fairy hill as frequently as Mitchison, in whose work – fiction, poetry and autobiography – it recurs over at least thirty years. During these years her concept of the fairy hill, or of the country inside it, can be seen to change. Her first sustained treatment of the fairy hill tradition is the short story 'Mirk, Mirk Night' of 1936.¹³ Both the title and the epigraph come from the ballad 'Thomas the Rhymer'. Thomas is lured into the fairy hill like the piper in *The Big House*, but for somewhat different reasons.

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
A ferlie he spied wi his ee,
And there he spied a lady bright
Come riding down by the Eildon tree...

'Harp and carp, Thomas,' she said,
'Harp and carp along wi me,
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your bodie I will be.'¹⁴

The question of the fairy lover in the fairy hill will be discussed later.

'Mirk, Mirk Night', like other stories in its collection, is primarily concerned with presenting a social message. The narrator is a young woman

¹² George Mackay Brown, *A Spell for Green Corn* (Hogarth Press, 1970), p. 82. [First broadcast 1967]

¹³ NM, 'Mirk, Mirk Night', *FP*, pp. 259-89.

¹⁴ 'Thomas the Rhymer', Lyle, pp. 132-4 (132).

who has been taken by the fairies. 'It was during the seventh year that I began to become aware of where I was and why.' (p. 259) She learns that (like Tam Lin, that other famous fairyland abductee) she is in danger of becoming 'the teind to hell', the seven-yearly payment due from fairyland to the devil. She escapes, with mortal help, back to Middle Earth, the real world. With her rescuer, a young working-class man, she can look forward to married life, housekeeping, and occasional political meetings. If this lifestyle seems slightly unconvincing (possibly due to Mitchison's unease in a working-class register, as discussed in chapter 7), it is clearly intended to be seen as preferable to fairyland.

At this stage of her thinking about fairyland, Mitchison presents it as a place of superficial attraction, contrasted with the real world of human relationships. In 'Mirk, Mirk Night' she gives us a chilling and persuasive glimpse of this:

I touched what was below the grass [of fairyland], and this was hard and smooth ... The ground – for it was neither earth nor sand nor rock – was dry, polished, unpierceable ... For a moment I saw through the leaves and past the bright eyes and hair of my friend, and there was no sky. (pp. 260-1)

This view of fairyland is that of James Hogg's 'Kilmeny', published in his collection *The Queen's Wake* (1813):

Kilmeny had been where the cock never crew,
Where the rain never fell, and the wind never blew ...
A land of love, and a land of light,
Withouten sun, or moon, or night ...
The sky was a dome of crystal bright,
The fountain of vision, and fountain of light.¹⁵

Though there is light, it is an unnatural light, devoid of life. Similarly Anodos in *Phantastes*, on his journey in Fairy Land, finds a marble palace with a great hall full of statues on pedestals labelled TOUCH NOT!¹⁶ In contrast, it

¹⁵ James Hogg, 'Kilmeny', *The Poetry of Scotland*, ed. by Roderick Watson (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 424-32 (425, 427).

¹⁶ George MacDonald, *Phantastes*; see chapter XIV, pp. 188-98.

is the touch of a human hand which rescues Mitchison's narrator in 'Mirk, Mirk Night' from the fairy forest:

It was a large, rather rough hand, with thick nails. ... It closed on my hand and I laid my other above, onto its wrist, which I could feel, but not see because of the greyness. And then it lifted me. (p. 270)

Mitchison's fairyland simulates organic life – there appears to be grass, though there is no earth for it to grow in – and this view of fairyland as a place of deception is that of folklore and tradition (for instance, fairy gold brought back to the real world is nothing but dry leaves). It has been suggested in chapter 5 that Mitchison may also have been aware of Andrew Lang's children's novel *The Gold of Fairnilee*,¹⁷ which draws on Scottish folklore, including 'Tam Lin' and 'Thomas the Rhymer'. Kelpies, brownies and changelings feature in fireside tales told by the old nurse to the children Randal and Jean (pp. 159-64). When Randal in his turn becomes a prisoner in the fairy hill, however, Lang demonstrates a more personal vision of fairyland. Randal finds a bottle of magic water (which may be holy water: this would connect with Lang's theory of a pagan origin for fairy belief, quoted in chapter 5).

Now this water had the power to destroy the 'glamour' in Fairyland, and make people see it as it really was. And when Randal touched his eyes with it, lo, everything was changed in a moment. ... The gold vanished from the embroidered curtains, the light grew dim and wretched like a misty winter day. The Fairy Queen, that had seemed so happy and beautiful in her bright dress, was a weary, pale woman in black, with a melancholy face and melancholy eyes. She looked as if she had been there for thousands of years, always longing for the sunlight and the earth, and the wind and rain. (pp. 182-3)

It is a moment of some power, comparable to the discovery by the narrator of 'Mirk, Mirk Night' that 'there [is] no sky'.

The fairy hill at Port-na-Sgadan, which Su and Winkie enter in the first part of *The Big House* and whose inhabitants pursue them in the second

¹⁷ Andrew Lang, *The Gold of Fairnilee*, in *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales*, ed. by Gordon Jarvie (Penguin, 1997), pp. 149-94. [*The Gold of Fairnilee* originally published 1888]

part, may perhaps be seen as a transitional stage in Mitchison's thinking about fairyland. As noted in chapter 5, the country inside the fairy hill puts on its most alluring aspect to entice Su and Winkie. There is no hint of artificiality: it is as real as real life. 'They knelt beside the wild fawn tamed among the grass and bells and flower candles and spires and all was well.' (p. 71) When, having refused the fairy gift, they find themselves standing among withered flowers beside the dead fawn, the peripeteia is all the more effective, and the fairies are exposed as all the more coldly cruel.

Thus, in Mitchison's perception, it is no longer the case that fairyland presents only a veneer of reality. Now, to all the senses, it is real, if that suits the purpose of the fairies. A few years after *The Big House*, in the children's novel *The Fairy Who Couldn't Tell a Lie*,¹⁸ Mitchison gives us another picture of life inside the fairy hill, with the difference that this time the narrator is herself a fairy. The picture is therefore favourable on the whole, and since the beauty and comfort are part of Brec the fairy's real world, there is no danger that they will disappear. However, Brec has been cursed – as the fairies see it – with inability to tell a lie. This causes difficulty in her life as a fairy. 'After all, if a lie was easy and pleasant, why bother with anything else? Or so the rest of the fairies thought.' (p. 22) And even in her home, the fairy hill, Brec finds

... some of the passages which were dimly lit and about which little was known, or had long been forgotten. Some of them went on a long way, and were very queer indeed. You heard hootings and scufflings, crowing and grunting and sobbing, or sometimes a tune repeated maddeningly over and over again. And you could never see where any of this came from. (p. 22)

Not everything inside the fairy hill is to be trusted, even by a fairy.

In the early 1960s there occurred a major development in Mitchison's life, a shift in her focus: her involvement with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana. The book she published in 1966 about the early years of her African

¹⁸ NM, *The Fairy Who Couldn't Tell a Lie* (Collins, 1963).

experience is titled *Return to the Fairy Hill*. Mitchison's reason for choosing this title is not immediately apparent. Early in the Foreword she mentions the similarity she has found between West Highland and Botswana folklore and belief.

Where I have certain concepts in my unconscious, for instance, magic and the Fairy Hill which I use as a main symbol in this book, my Batswana friends have other concepts but also including a 'they', a 'not us', highly comparable to certain aspects of the Celtic fairies, the Sidhe. (*RFH*, p. 2)

But that in itself does not quite explain why she uses the fairy hill as a 'main symbol' in this deeply felt book.

The fairy hill appears to be Africa, specifically Botswana¹⁹ and more specifically the territory of the Bakgatla tribe, centred on the village of Mochudi. The paramount chief of the Bakgatla is Linchwe, a young man in his twenties, in whom Mitchison places great hopes.

I, for instance, expect that Linchwe of the Bakgatla will have outstanding qualities of courage, generosity, intellectual curiosity, essential truthfulness and the kind of intelligence that is nearer insight or what is called intuition but does not exclude logical thought. ... I think [these] are the highest human qualities, whether in Africa, Asia or Europe. If I help to bring them out [in Linchwe], it is because they were there already. (p. 192)

She describes him early in the book (p. 38) as 'the focus and centre [of the Bakgatla], the Chief, the fairy king.' He is the key symbol. As he is the fairy king, so the place where he reigns is the fairy hill. '[Mochudi] remains the fairy hill, the place to which one must come back.' (p. 199)

Throughout *Return to the Fairy Hill* the reader receives almost exclusively Mitchison's view of Linchwe and of his territory. Given such extravagant passages as that quoted above, a suspicion arises that Mitchison is to some extent fictionalising and romanticising the situation. She acknowledges this possibility herself: 'I began to wonder if me-and-the-tribe

¹⁹ Referred to in *RFH* as Bechuanaland; the name was changed in 1966.

was in some way a recap of my own books.’ (p. 73) The suspicion can only be strengthened as she further identifies Linchwe with the mythical Corn King, or with that character in her 1931 novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Further, she appears to admit that she did see herself as Erif Der the Spring Queen, though, aged over sixty when she meets Linchwe, she acknowledges that some adjustment may have to be made. She is with Linchwe at an evening of dancing prior to his installation as Chief:

Even if now I was only the Winter Queen, I was with my Corn King – but no, he was the Rain King. Without rain no corn. But the Fairy Hill was Marob, my place imagined over half a century, now real. (p. 52)

The fairy hill is now all good. This is a third stage in Mitchison’s perception of fairyland. In ‘Mirk Mirk Night’ she portrays it as a place of superficial, insubstantial beauty, far inferior to the richness of real human life. In *The Big House* it is to all appearances better than real life, but the appearances are deceptive: the beauty can instantly disappear. By the time of *Return to the Fairy Hill* it is better than real life, and it really exists.

It exists, at least, in Africa. Mitchison depicts herself as disenchanted with real life at home in Scotland, and with the people around her there.

One had one’s eye in for a certain kind of beauty, for the agate eyes and the plum-bloom skin, the delicate ears and the smooth facial lines. ... I wonder if [my colleagues] noticed me covering my eyes with my hands during the meeting at Tobermory so as not to see the craggy features, the extraordinary texture and colour of the skin, the alarming northern blue of the irises, the light brown of the bushy eyebrows. (p. 190)

She gives chapter 12 of *Return to the Fairy Hill*, the locus of this quotation, the title ‘Quando fiam uti chelidon?’ – ‘When shall I become as a swallow?’²⁰ She feels the instinctive urge of the swallow to return to Africa. The strongly physical tone of her comments on African and Scots features reminds us that it is a biological urge, but her yearning has another source.

²⁰ This line is originally from the anonymous late Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, the Vigil of Venus, but appears in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (line 428). Thanks to Hamish Whyte for his help with this. Either may be NM’s source; she quotes the Latin poem in *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p. 85.

She has found in Africa a society in which, as suggested in chapter 1 of this thesis, myth is recognised as a social function. She sees that the need for myth in everyday life is not peculiar to herself, but in this society at least is a general human instinct; perhaps it is a universal human need. This above all is why she feels so much at home in Africa.

What, then, does 'the fairy hill' mean to Mitchison by this stage in her work? It is, as argued, a place detached from the everyday world. Douglas Gifford has described it as 'the world where ordinary laws don't apply, the "other landscape" of Neil Gunn'. It has been noted that in the same passage of commentary Gifford adds '[Mitchison] sees the "fairy hill" as a kind of shorthand, ancestral term for a level of consciousness which is of the past, perhaps part of the "collective unconscious" or racial memory'.²¹ This is the level on which she finds its deeper meaning to be shared by her African friends.

But the close involvement of the fairy hill with the relationship between the young man Linchwe and herself – for, as evidenced by her citation of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, it seems that she is now inescapably part of the myth – must lead us to conjecture that she sees the fairy hill as a place of sexual attraction. This idea too has a firm basis in tradition and in the ballads. It links to the concept of chthonic fertility powers explored, as discussed earlier, by George Mackay Brown in *A Spell for Green Corn*.

Thomas the Rhymer is seduced by 'a lady bright' who proves to be the fairy queen. If he kisses her, she says, 'sure of your bodie I will be'. Thomas is by no means reluctant.

'Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunt me;
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips
All underneath the Eildon Tree.'²²

²¹ Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', pp. 230, 231.

²² Lyle, p. 132.

Some time before the opening of the ballad 'Tam Lin' a similar seduction has taken place, as narrated by Tam Lin himself.

'And ance it fell upon a day,
A cauld day and a snell,
When we were frae the hunting come,
That frae my horse I fell;
The Queen o Fairies she caught me,
In yon green hill to dwell ...'²³

Tam Lin appears to have flourished in fairyland (his worry that he may be chosen as 'the teind to hell' is precisely because he is 'sae fair and fu o flesh'), and has himself taken on the role of the fairy lover, waylaying maidens at Carterhaugh. The brave and wilful Janet meets him there despite warnings, becomes pregnant, and goes back to claim him from the fairies in order to give her child a father, in an ordeal scene which, as noted in chapter 5, Mitchison replicates in *The Big House*.

The importance of boundaries – liminal spaces – in human-fairy relations has been noted in chapter 5. Angela Bourke, writing on a notorious case in nineteenth-century Ireland when a woman was tortured and killed by her husband and other relatives on suspicion of being a fairy, observes, very relevantly to the question of the fairy hill:

[T]he whole Irish tradition of fairies is preoccupied with boundaries, including those of the human body. Visits to the fairy realm may be presented as illicit penetrations of the earth's orifices, when curiosity and lack of caution make human characters, who are usually young and male, explore caves, rock clefts, or other hidden openings which unexpectedly appear in the familiar landscape.²⁴

Maureen Duffy also identifies the rationale behind the stories of fairy lovers.

Fairyland is ... a world of forbidden wishes surrounded by a magic wall of taboo which must be broken before we enter it ... The moments of taboo-breaking are all moments of lowered resistance: falling asleep, sickness, being out alone and at night.²⁵

²³ Lyle, p. 128.

²⁴ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (Pimlico, 1999), p. 106.

²⁵ Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), p. 73.

While Duffy goes on to describe these moments – Thomas the Rhymer falling asleep on Huntly bank, Janet going to Carterhaugh to meet Tam Lin – in terms of fairy and folk tale, it is her intention to point out that these are also moments of potential hazard (or opportunity) in real life. The correlation is recognised by several recent commentators. Ronald Black, in his introduction to a new edition of John Gregorson Campbell's collection of Highland folklore, summarises:

It gradually strikes the twenty-first-century eye that the stories collected by JGC, Lady Gregory and Yeats speak of a spectrum of social issues – the fears and perils of marriage (forced and otherwise), sex, illness, domestic violence, murder, abduction, rape, physical decay, death, famine, abuse (physical, mental and sexual), worry, stress, phobia, drunkenness and alcoholism, schizophrenia, guilt, heaven, hell and purgatory.²⁶

Angela Bourke explains further:

Fairies belong to the margins, and so can serve as reference points and metaphors for all that is marginal in human life. Their underground existence allows them to stand for the unconscious, for the secret, or the unspeakable, and their constant eavesdropping explains the need sometimes to speak in riddles, or to avoid discussion of certain topics.²⁷

She notes too: 'The overwhelming message of the fairy-legends is that the unexpected may be guarded against by careful observance of society's rules' (p. 30), and suggests that there may have been, if only subconsciously, another motive for the young wife's mistreatment.

[S]he was an attractive and strong-minded woman, who enjoyed a higher level of personal and economic independence than most of her peers ... while stories about her abduction by fairies could have been a euphemistic way of noting her extra-marital activities. (p. 86)

Whether or not Mitchison is fully aware of this code, she is certainly familiar with the convention that the fairy hill includes a fairy lover. One of

²⁶ Ronald Black, 'Introduction', John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), pp. xix-lxxxii (xxxiv-v). Much of the Introduction is devoted to analysing stories in this light.

²⁷ Bourke, p. 28.

her earliest treatments of the fairy hill is on this theme: the attraction of fairyland and of a fairy lover against the humdrum happiness of everyday domestic life. The work in question is the poem sequence 'Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man', contemporary with the story 'Mirk, Mirk Night'.²⁸ It has a traditional West Highland setting – in fact, Craignish – but Mitchison departs from traditional sources and develops the situation in several significant ways.

The sequence consists of five short untitled poems (their first lines are given below for identification) which will be referred to here by number:

I 'Oh maybe 'tis my rock'

II 'Scarba is purple glass; the ruffling waves grow dim'

III 'Though you should bid me keep still, keep still'

IV 'Oh wha's this couching at my breist bane'

V 'Oh maybe 'tis my rock'

Poem I begins the sequence with what is apparently a conventional treatment of the fairy lover theme, couched in a version of Scots balladry dangerously near pastiche. The development of the sequence, however, suggests that the pastiche is Mitchison's intention.

Oh maybe 'tis my rock
And maybe 'tis my reel,
And whiles it is the cradle
And whiles it is the creel.

I should be redding my house
But oh, I'm stepping away
To hear high up in the fern
The tune that the fairies play.

Oh my bonny stone house
With the meal ark full to the brim!
But my fairy man's in the fern
And I must away to him ...

There are seven further stanzas, all spoken, or perhaps sung, by a somewhat stereotypical Highland lassie. They proceed, with the repetition

²⁸ NM, 'Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man', *FP*, pp. 219-22.

appropriate to a ballad, through her household concerns: shearing, ewe-milking, weaving, the bairn, and back to the spinning with which she began.

Poem II dispenses with the ballad form and with the stereotype.

Scarba is purple glass; the ruffling waves grow dim.
Wild deer of Scarba, swim to me over the sound,
Ach, Corryvrechan pulls you, but swim to me strongly, swim!
There is no stag of you all that runs as lightly as him,
Stepping on my quick shadow, pinning it to the ground.

Luining is low on the sea, a dark and a gentle land.
Blackbirds of Luining, rise high in your airy throngs,
From the tall red fuchsias of Luining, fly low, fly across to my hand!
Blackbirds, hark to his singing, for well you should understand
The way that a grown woman gets caught in a net of songs.

All night the Paps of Jura are standing against the stars.
Oh paps of the Jura Woman that dreams of her lover's breast!
My breasts are remembering Uistean across all fairy bars;
Though I, too, am a mother, freckled with suckling scars,
Yet I would that his head were lying here on my heart's nest.

The generic Highland croft is now firmly located (by the use of the place-names Scarba, Corryvrechan, Luining, Jura) in the Craignish area. More importantly, the generic Highland lassie is now a clearly realised individual woman. Having responded to the attraction of the fairy man, she is a prisoner in fairyland. Her 'quick shadow' has been 'pinn[ed] to the ground'; she has been 'caught in a net of songs'. And where she previously dreamed of a fairy lover, she now longs for the earthly Uistean (more usually spelled Uisdean: a Gaelic equivalent of Hugh). His status is not specified; perhaps he is her husband back in the croft.

In poem III her discontent in the fairy hill, and with the fairy lover, has reached the point of rejection.

Though you should bid me keep still, keep still,
And set my body to yours in kindness,
Though I should smile in a magicked blindness
On hands that strangle and eyes that kill,
Though for your sake I am thoughtless, mindless,
You shall not possess me, nor no man will:
For I am the woman who writes the songs

So I cannot stay in the Fairy Hill.

Like Thomas the Rhymer and Tam Lin, she has acquiesced to a sexual relationship with the fairy lover in a 'magicked blindness'. She has been 'thoughtless, mindless', but that is past, and now she has recognised the intrinsic cruelty of the fairies, with their 'hands that strangle and eyes that kill'. She has discarded emotion for thought.

She asserts her own worth as not merely a passive lover but an independent woman, ready to discard not only the fairy lover but any man (including Uistean?) if he tries to 'possess' her. The reason for this declaration is unexpected and intriguing: it is because she is 'the woman who writes the songs'. This has been only glancingly suggested in poem I, where the Highland lassie does make songs at the shearing. Now she is placing her vocation as a writer on at least a level footing with her function as a wife, mother and lover. It is tempting to draw a parallel with Mitchison's own stance in life and in writing.

Poem IV is in a rather self-conscious Scots which Mitchison sometimes employs in early poems.²⁹ Nevertheless the theme of independence is maintained.

... Stand up, thou Self of me, for we maun come to grips!
We will forget the fairy and the light that doonses and dips,
And the eyes and the hands of him, and the brushing of his lips.

The first stanza of poem V is identical to that of poem I, but this poem concludes the sequence with two further stanzas which clearly demonstrate a development in the character of the Highland lassie.

Oh maybe 'tis the meal ark
That stands beside the wall,
And maybe 'tis the weaving,
And I'll be seeing to all.

And maybe 'tis the pot,
And maybe 'tis the pan,
But I can write songs as good

²⁹ See for instance the war poems 'The Reid Hackle' (*LB*, pp. 57-8) and 'Lament' (*LB*, p. 62).

As the songs of the fairy Man!

Still engaged in her household duties, she is now able to assert, over and above them, her special ability as a writer, and a woman writer at that. With the genially irreverent upper-case M of Man, the whole poem sequence arguably becomes a feminist statement.

‘Mairi MacLean and the Fairy Man’, however, leaves us with another question, foregrounded by Mitchison’s deliberate choice to begin with a pastiche ballad which then opens out into something much more free in style and personal in tone. How has this ordinary young housewife discovered her gift as a writer? The answer is clearly implied: she has found it in the fairy hill, in the arms of a fairy lover. The fairy hill as a source of inspiration; the fairy lover as an influence moving ordinary life on to a level of heightened intensity and empowerment; this is a reading which can make sense of Mitchison’s title for her African memoir, *Return to the Fairy Hill*. On her first visit to Linchwe in Mochudi Mitchison began to write poetry again after a long dry spell: ‘It is very curious after years to find the springs of poetry refilling’ (RFH, p. 37), and began to write the African novel *When We Become Men* in a creative passion which she describes as ‘a state of obsession ... a state of Grace’ (p. 68).

The swan maiden

The idea of the fairy lover as an agent of transformation and liberation is highly relevant with regard to the question of the swan maiden motif in Mitchison’s writing. The swan maiden – a supernatural being who is at times a young woman and at times a swan – appears several times in her fiction and poetry (as for instance in the poem ‘The Boar of Badenoch and the Sow of Athol’, quoted as an epigraph to this chapter). Two of her fictional treatments occur in children’s novels. In *The Big House* (1950) the young heroine Su takes the form of a swan to travel back through time. In *The Fairy Who Couldn’t Tell a Lie* (1963), Brec, the eponymous fairy, belongs to the clan of wild swans, whose leader is the Chief Swan Maid.

Preceding both of these in the chronology of Mitchison's writing is the short story 'Five Men and a Swan', written in 1940 at the request of her friend the Carradale fisherman Denis Macintosh.

Wrote two stories in Carradale dialect, both pretty good, one about the best thing I've written, I think – Five Men and a Swan. It came of Denny M clamouring to be told a story and saying wouldn't I write a love story, so I said yes, I'll write a swan story so I wrote this fairy tale about the swan woman and read it to Denny M on Sunday; ... he was obviously completely caught by it and responded as I would have liked. It is pretty indecent; it would have passed all right a few years ago, but though the highbrows [literary magazines] would take it, I'm doubtful about my present audience. (*AYTN*, pp. 101-2)

Yet in a later diary entry she thinks that her 'present audience', not the contemporary London-based literary magazines, is the readership she wants:

Tom, to my great pleasure, had very much liked my Swan story, which I gave him, thought I should send it to *Horizon*, but then, if I did, would the people I mean it for, read it? Rob Ruadh [another fisherman] told me at the dance he had read it twice and wanted to read it three times 'to get the point behind it all' – ! [*NM's exclamation mark*] (p. 124)³⁰

Mitchison sent a copy of the story to Neil Gunn, with whom she had recently begun a correspondence. He responded with great praise, saying, among much else:

I think that just this very kind of work is creative work ... here we are sort of getting into another dimension ... If I was in the hunt it's this swan rather than Proust's one that I'd like to keep my eye on.³¹

In spite of Gunn's and Harrison's enthusiasm for the story, no periodical publication of 'Five Men and a Swan' has so far been traced. It does not appear in print until the collection *Five Men and a Swan*, published in 1957.³² In reviews it was not generally singled out from the rest of the short stories and poems in the volume, and several contemporary reviewers

³⁰ The reference is to Tom Harrison (1911-76), a friend of NM and co-founder of Mass-Observation, the organisation for which she was keeping the diary.

³¹ See NM, 'A Self-Interview', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, XIV (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 37-51. NM quotes from this letter of 6 March 1941 on pp. 46-7. The reference is presumably to Proust's novel *Du Côté de chez Swann* (1913).

³² NM, 'Five Men and a Swan', *FMS*, pp. 37-51.

adopt a dismissive tone towards the book as a whole, disliking both style and subject matter.

Most of the stories ... are about Gaeldom, chiefly about those therein concerned with the fishing. Mrs Mitchison writes in a prose style which draws heavily on Gaelic for its inversions and some of its turns of phrase. True, we don't quite get down to the 'troutling of my heart' level, but, linguistically, we do seem sometimes to be sailing waters gey fey. However, the stories are all well told.³³

Another reviewer might have been better advised to pass the book to a colleague.

[M]any of these pieces involve fantasy – fantasy tottering sometimes on the very Western edge of whimsy – and for that I have not the apparently insatiable appetite of so many Scots. For those who do like looking Westward and backward and upward rather than at the hard present straight in front of their eyes, this will no doubt prove a delightful book. For me, even when she is dealing with the hard present, her manner is an almost insurmountable obstacle.³⁴

Only one appears to appreciate the story and its writer.

... Naomi Mitchison has written a folk-fairytale with a contemporary setting, an astonishing synthesis of tenderness, brutality, beauty, honour, and sheer magic which is also a parable of human greed and stupidity. Although Mrs Mitchison can write the naturalistic short story as well as anyone ... she has too great a love of glamourie to exclude it from her work; 'In the Plane' and 'In the Family' are almost as striking as the title-story in their combination of Celtic romanticism with the earthy reality of the workaday world. There is no one else writing today who possesses this equal delight in the fey and in the fact.³⁵

This is the level of appreciation accorded by modern critics. The reviewer has noticed Mitchison's recurrent juxtaposition of the supernatural or mythical with ordinary life, but perceptively singles out 'Five Men and a Swan', the confident transposition of traditional folktale to literary short story which, as

³³ 'M.L.', [review], *Scottish Field*, 105 (August 1958), 38. The reviewer may tentatively be identified as Maurice Lindsay.

³⁴ 'W.K.', [review], *Scotland's Magazine*, 54 (February 1958), 54. This may be Walter Keir, a contemporary reviewer.

³⁵ Catriona Mackie, 'Short Supernaturals', *Saltire Review*, 5 (Spring 1958), 79.

we have seen, Mitchison felt when it was newly completed to be 'about the best thing I've written'.

The narrative begins in the forecastle of a fishing boat – presumably, given the story's provenance, a Carradale boat – with the casual yarning of the five crew members: the skipper Hat, Black Rob, Johnnie the Ghost, Alec the engineer, and Willie the young cook. They are talking about women, and, unusually, Hat objects to the broad tone of the conversation and asks them to stop.

Hat relates the story of his encounter with a swan maiden. He found her swimming offshore on a night of full moon, having left her feather dress on the rocks. He picked the dress up and took it home, intending only to 'be tricking her a wee bit' (p. 95), and thus forced the girl – the Swan – to follow, begging for its return. In his house, 'he went just a hairsbreadth too far with the Swan' (p. 96), three times. In the morning, she and the feather dress were gone.

She has told him that she will return every month on the Saturday of full moon. In succeeding months two of the other fishermen keep the rendezvous, and both rape the Swan, not only to her great distress but to their own misfortune: there is now nothing but bad luck and quarrelling on the boat.

Alec the engineer says they have all approached the Swan in the wrong way; he proposes to marry her. At the next full moon they are married before witnesses (a legal marriage in Scotland at the time), but the girl turns back into a swan. Alec tries to cut off the feather dress and reach his bride, but injures the Swan, who struggles free and escapes.

Alec leaves the crew and the others have no more encounters with the Swan, except for the boy Willie (not yet interested in women) who asks her for help with the football pools. He has a win by following her advice, but fritters the money away. Meanwhile Alec considers himself married to her.

When World War II breaks out he volunteers for the Navy and his ship is bombed. In the sea, about to drown, he is rescued by the Swan, who confirms that she is his wife. On his sick leave they will have two full moons together, two nights in which she will take her human form. In wartime, 'which one of us can see more than the two moons ahead?' (p. 110).

Hat's meeting with the Swan comprises exactly the nucleus of the traditional swan maiden folk tale, which has been summarised by Helge Holmström:

A man steals the skin from a swan maiden, usually while she is bathing, and thus forces her into marriage: after some time the wife manages to get her feather garment back and immediately disappears.³⁶

It is a story type of wide distribution, appearing in the standard reference work, Aarne/Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale*, under type 400, The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife.

D361.1. Swan Maiden. A swan transforms herself at will into a maiden. She resumes her swan form by putting on her swan coat. K1335. Seduction (or wooing) by stealing clothes of bathing girl (swan maiden). D721.2. Disenchantment by hiding skin (covering). When the enchanted person has temporarily removed the covering, it is stolen and the victim remains disenchanted until it is found. B652.1. Marriage to swan maiden.³⁷

The main full-length studies of the swan maiden story are those by Helge Holmström, whose monograph of 1919 deals with the provenance, distribution and variants of the swan maiden motif, and Barbara Fass Leavy, whose work of 1994 is strongly gender-oriented: the swan maiden is every woman trapped in a traditional marriage.

I will propose that the swan maiden tale could at one time be found in virtually every corner of the world because ... woman *was* a symbolic outsider, was the *other*, and marriage demanded an intimate

³⁶ Helge Holmström, *Studier över Svanjungfrumotivet* (Malmö: Förlag Maïander, 1919), p. 11. [This work has not been published in English. Quotations throughout are my translation from the original Swedish.]

³⁷ Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*, translated and enlarged Stith Thompson, 2nd edn (Helsinki, 1961), p. 129.

involvement in a world never quite her own. The stories' themes depict this estrangement.³⁸

A brief survey of theories on the origin and affinities of the swan maiden story is given in Appendix II. The point of particular relevance here is that both Holmström and Leavy link the swan maiden with other supernatural lovers. Holmström considers that swan maiden narratives not as a strictly demarcated story type but as

a detached type, even if the largest and most characteristic, of a still larger group of folk narratives ... The formula for this group may be expressed thus: narratives of marriage with supernatural female beings, who after a time disappear.³⁹

The parameters of his research therefore include seal maiden, hag marriage and fairy marriage stories. Leavy similarly devotes chapters to the demon lover, the incubus (or hag), and the animal groom, as well as the animal bride, a category which includes the swan maiden. Considered in this company, the swan maiden can be seen to stand in a perhaps unexpectedly close relationship to the fairy lover who, as has been noted, is in Mitchison's work and elsewhere an essential adjunct to the fairy hill.

The common characteristic which links all these supernatural beings is metamorphosis or shape-shifting, a recurrent feature of myth (see for instance Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and also of folk tale. Mitchison was undoubtedly aware of the concept from an early age: her wide reading of myths, fairy tales and folk tales as a child has been examined in chapter 2, and her first novel, *The Conquered*, culminates, as already noted, in Meromic's metamorphosis into a wolf.

In the diary reference to 'Five Men and a Swan' quoted above, she refers to 'this fairy tale about the swan woman', with the implication that she is familiar with 'the swan woman' as the central figure of a story. Swan maidens and seal maidens are examples of metamorphosis, being by

³⁸ Barbara Fass Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 2.

definition sometimes young women and sometimes swans or seals. The night-hag (Swedish *mara*, hence *nightmare*), who lies on top of a sleeper so that he finds it difficult to breathe, may take the form of a beautiful young woman or, less pleasingly, a wad of straw, which if stabbed may change again into the bleeding corpse of a malignant neighbour. The fairy bride or bridegroom sometimes appears first as an attractive human, and may or may not enter marriage in that form, but at other times appears as an animal.

A worldwide phenomenon in terms of the folk tale, metamorphosis similarly occurs in many literatures. In her study of the topic Marina Warner examines Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), pointing out that it goes beyond the template of myth, 'as if Ovid had remained with Arachne, attentive to her mental state after Minerva had spellbound her in the shape of a spider'.⁴⁰ Louise Erdrich draws on Native American legends for her novel *The Antelope Wife*:

Four women eating snow cones as they stroll the powwow grounds. ... They are light steppers with a gravity of sure grace. ... They pass into the darkness, into the night. ... I take the medicine man's arm ... I'm going to get me an antelope. I need some antelope medicine, I say.⁴¹

Scottish literature also draws on the concept of metamorphosis. The ballads (both Scottish and English) are particularly rich in examples, which L.C. Wimberly groups under the heading 'The Animal-Soul'.

Under the general term 'animal-soul' I include such forms of the soul as the deer, the wolf, the hare, the serpent, and the seal. From evidence supplied by a number of ballads we may claim for British folk-poetry the belief that the soul may at death pass into animal form or that a person through magic means and without the interposition of death may be so metamorphosed.⁴²

³⁹ Holmström, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 114.

⁴¹ Louise Erdrich, *The Antelope Wife* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998), pp. 23-6.

⁴² Lowry C. Wimberly, *Folklore in English and Scottish Ballads* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), p. 52.

In George MacDonald's short story 'The Grey Wolf' a young English student on a walking tour in Shetland meets a light-footed young woman with an unhealthily grey complexion, very white teeth and fierce craving eyes. Padding footfalls in the dark prepare us for the dénouement:

[T]he creature as she sprung eluded his grasp, and just as he expected to feel her fangs, he found a woman weeping on his bosom, with her arms around his neck. The next instant, the grey wolf broke from him, and bounded howling up the cliff.⁴³

In Eric Linklater's 'Sealskin Trousers', a selkie persuades a human girl to join him as a seal.⁴⁴ Linklater's is a modern view of the selkie legend and allows the possibility that the abduction is all in his narrator's mind, but George Mackay Brown's 'Sealskin' follows the classic pattern, identical to that of the swan maiden story.⁴⁵ A young man finds a sealskin, takes it home, and marries the seal woman to whom it belongs; they have a child, but the woman finds her sealskin and goes back to the sea. Brown, however, takes the narrative further: 'This story is really about a man and his music' (p. 151). The son of the crofter and the seal woman becomes a distinguished composer. As in Mitchison's 'Mairi MacLean', the expectations of commonplace life are subverted through the agency of a supernatural lover.

Such are the ancestors and affinities of the swan maiden story. Its meaning is more problematic. We may begin with the symbolism of the swan itself, immanent in such works as Sibelius's 'The Swan of Tuonela' (from the Lemminkäinen Suite, Op. 22, 1895). Swans are also important to Sibelius's 5th Symphony (1915/1919). According to his biographer Erik Tawaststjerna, Sibelius noted in his diary on 21 April 1915, while writing the 5th Symphony, that he had seen a flight of sixteen swans – 'one of the greatest impressions of my life' – and responded with the tremendous 'swan theme' of the finale.⁴⁶

⁴³ George MacDonald, 'The Grey Wolf', in *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales*, pp. 132-9 (139).

⁴⁴ Eric Linklater, 'Sealskin Trousers', *The Goose Girl*, pp. 43-56.

⁴⁵ George Mackay Brown, 'Sealskin', *Hawkfall* (Triad/Panther Books, 1983), pp. 137-60. [Originally published 1974]

⁴⁶ Quoted at www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/index

W.B. Yeats's poem 'The Wild Swans at Coole' (1919) also comes to mind: 'Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still.'⁴⁷

The folklore scholar Anne Ross provides a useful summary.

[The swan's] manifestly prominent role in the solar cults of Bronze Age Europe ... doubtless helped to establish its permanent position in the mythology and in the literary legends of later Europe. In the essentially Celtic traditions it serves to express concepts of benevolence, purity, sexual love, magic music and sweetness generally. In the vernacular literature of Ireland the bird is the form adopted by otherworld beings setting out on love quests ...⁴⁸

She points out, however, that differentiation should be made between these Irish swan metamorphoses and 'the international swan maiden tale', which has a 'separate agent of metamorphosis', the swan dress.⁴⁹ (The meaning of the myth, in the opinion of some commentators, turns on the meaning of the swan dress; see Appendix II.)

Since Holmström and Leavy consider swan maiden stories to be a variant of the animal lover motif, a wider view may be sought, such as Bengt Holbek's thesis on the interpretation of fairy tales:

The symbolic element of fairy tales convey emotional impressions of beings, phenomena and events in the real world, organized in the form of fictional narrative sequences which allow the narrator to speak of the problems, hopes and ideals of the community.⁵⁰

Holbek suggests that the process whereby 'emotional *impressions* [are] metamorphosed into symbolic *expressions*' is governed by 'a set of closely related rules or, better, by a principle which may be specified in the forms of a number of rules', one of these rules being '*The split* ... [which] occurs in several forms: between the 'good' and the 'bad' aspects of a character ..., between the active and passive aspects and between the spiritual

⁴⁷ W.B. Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole', *Selected Poetry*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares, rev. ed. (Pan Books, 1990), pp. 64-5.

⁴⁸ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 293.

⁴⁹ Ross, p. 237.

⁵⁰ Bengt Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia/Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1987), p. 435.

and bodily aspects.’⁵¹ The last of these forms is relevant to the animal lover motif, and hence to the swan maiden story:

The split between the spiritual and bodily aspects of a human being may be found primarily on the M:F axis. The hero experiences his fiancée as an animal in daytime and a human at night ... or he sees her first as an animal and later as a human [and similarly for the heroine] ... This form of the split refers to the process of sexual maturation: the sexual appeal (and demands) of the future partner cannot at first be integrated with the hero(ine)’s mental concept of another human being. The final integration of the two aspects appears as a sudden transformation of the partner.⁵²

Holmström does not examine the meaning of the tale, but other recent writers on the swan maiden story tend to agree with the theory of the ‘split’, if not always with Holbek’s application of it. Leavy particularises.

As a woman’s story, the tale of the swan maiden can ... speak to fantasies of escape from the dreariness of earthly life. As a man’s tale it can speak to fears of victimization and abandonment.⁵³

Boria Sax considers the split to be that between the human and the natural world.

The stories of animal brides provide, as I will argue, a representation of [human/natural] bonds with remarkable clarity and simplicity. The husband represents humanity, while his bride represents the natural world. Their marriage, always troubled, represents the changing relationship between humanity and nature.⁵⁴

Clarissa Pinkola Estés takes a wider view:

Tales of creatures with mysterious human kinship are told across the world, for such represent an archetype, a universal knowing about an issue of soul.⁵⁵

One further possible interpretation may be noted. The swan maiden story is the basis for Tchaikovsky’s ballet *Swan Lake* (as noted below,

⁵¹ Holbek, p. 435. Italics are Holbek’s.

⁵² Holbek, pp. 436-7.

⁵³ Leavy, p. 162.

⁵⁴ Sax, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women who Run with the Wolves* (Rider, 1992), p. 256.

Mitchison sometimes refers to 'the Swan Queen' as if the term is equivalent to 'swan maiden') and it has been pointed out:

The fairy bride legend dramatised a central dilemma of romanticism – the search for the unattainable ideal and its often tragic outcome. ... The Prince's love for Odette, the enchanted swan, is in the romantic fairy-bride tradition, in which such a relationship represents no earthly sexual passion but the yearning for an ideal that exists only in the imagination.⁵⁶

We must now ask whether any of these interpretations represents the meaning of the Swan in Mitchison's story 'Five Men and a Swan'. What does the Swan mean to Mitchison?

It seems probable that she equates the swan maiden with the fairy lover who is such an essential part of her fairy hill concept. Here is an otherworldly being who disrupts the humdrum life of the fishermen, as the fairy man disrupts that of Mairi MacLean and the fairy queen disrupts that of Thomas the Rhymer. In this case the fishermen's lives are changed for the worse – bad luck and unhappiness follow – entirely because of their mishandling of the Swan, a pointer towards Mitchison's innovatory treatment of the story.

The spirit/body split postulated by Holbek is present in 'Five Men and a Swan'. The Swan is clearly a spiritual, 'other' being (we have seen that in Leavy's interpretation 'woman *was* a symbolic outsider, was the *other*'), but in the form of a woman she is capable of human sexual intercourse, as in the original swan maiden scenario. (While retellings tend to state that the hero 'marries' the swan maiden when she follows him for her feather dress, the Aarne/Thomson entry quoted above acknowledges the occurrence of seduction in traditional versions, and Mitchison ignores the more euphemistic formulation.)

The concept of the swan maiden or fairy lover as unattainable ideal is the one which should alert us to the fact that Mitchison has altered the original swan maiden story in several aspects. The first variation appears at

⁵⁶ *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, p. 36 (Suzanne Rahn, 'Ballet and Fairy Tales') and p. 512 (Suzanne Rahn, 'Tchaikovsky, Piotr Ilyich').

first sight comparatively unimportant: the presence of five men in the narrative, not the one man, or alternatively three brothers, featured in traditional versions. In the classic swan maiden scenario, a single man sees the bathing maiden and takes the swan dress home. Hat follows the pattern so far, but his telling his friends, who then want to join in, is somewhat contrary to tradition. It resembles more closely the variant in which three brothers see a group of swan maidens, but, as is customary in fairy tales, the youngest brother wins the most beautiful maiden; clearly, therefore, this is not Mitchison's model either.

Possibly she has increased the complement to the uncanonical number five purely as an adaptation to local conditions. Five was the minimum crew necessary to handle a fishing boat of the type used in Carradale in the 1940s, when the story was written.⁵⁷ It may also be noted, however, that the number five is 'the human microcosm; the number of man, forming a pentagon, with outstretched arms and legs'.⁵⁸ Possibly the five men (a grouping repeated, as noted below, in Mitchison's later story 'The Box', where they are not a crew) represent humanity, into whose life the non-human swan maiden irrupts.

Secondly, it will be noticed that Mitchison's Swan is not entirely an unattainable ideal. She is presented as such to begin with, and it is the iconoclasm of the three older men – their seizing of what should be regarded as unattainable – which brings them bad luck. Similarly, she is still 'other' enough not to co-operate fully with Alec's plan for a legal marriage. But by the end of the story she makes herself attainable to Alec.

This identifies the major originality in Mitchison's treatment of the story: she provides the Swan's point of view. In the classic scenario the swan maiden's role is almost entirely a passive one. It is the man who initiates the action by taking the swan skin and then marrying (or possessing) its owner. The swan woman is empowered to act only when she finds her feather dress. In some variants she evinces love for her children, either taking them away

⁵⁷ Thanks to Angus Martin for this information.

⁵⁸ See Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, under Numbers, p. 116.

with her or returning to see them, but seldom if ever for her husband. But the Swan's words and actions indicate that she loves Alec.

Mitchison may have found hints in other folk tales towards her humanising of the Swan. Seal maidens do sometimes show affection for their husbands; it is common for a seal woman to be emotionally torn between the man on shore and the selkie calling for her out at sea.⁵⁹ The Swan's helping Willie with the football pools may be a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment by Mitchison of the swan maiden's helping the hero, in some variants, to acquire the giant's treasure, sometimes by carrying out near-impossible tasks (though traditionally he thereby acquires her as well). But it is never the swan maiden's role to rescue her lover at the point of death. The Swan's rescue of Alec, with her 'sweet gentle voice' and her 'brooding over him and he burrowing ... under the smooth top feathers of her and into the warm down' (p. 109), appears to have no parallel in traditional swan maiden stories. Uniquely, she is not sometimes a woman and sometimes a swan, but swan and woman at the same time. This is one of Mitchison's achievements in 'Five Men and a Swan'.

Since at the time of writing the story in 1941 Mitchison was greatly interested in and involved with the Carradale fishermen – as noted, she wrote it at the request of her friend Denis Macintosh and recorded reactions from him and another fisherman – it is tempting to ask whether there is a personal element to the story. Her self-identification with her central female characters has been proposed earlier. The possibility that this applies to the Swan is strengthened by Mitchison's remark in an interview of 1983.

'You know the story of the man who marries the Fairy Swan Queen, and so long as he allows her to fly away when she needs to, she'll always come back, but if he seizes her and burns her wings, things turn bad? Well Dick would always let me go, and I'd do the same for him. And we always came back.'⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See for instance Walter Traill Dennison, *Orkney Folklore and Sea Legends* (Kirkwall: Orkney Press, 1995), pp. 81-4.

⁶⁰ 'Naomi Mitchison' [interview by Leonie Caldecott] in *Women of Our Century*, ed. by Leonie Caldecott (BBC, 1984), pp. 11-34 (25).

When Mitchison came to Carradale, as much of her autobiographical writing of the time (including her diary *Among You Taking Notes*) makes clear, she was the outsider, the 'other', descending into the lives of the fishermen and other villagers. She believed that, to some extent at least, she had (like the fairy man or the Swan) the potential to change their lives, to introduce the culture of another world.

[C]hildren and grown-ups alike come and borrow books [from NM's library] ... I should like ... to see a Sunday debating society and much Sunday reading ... Honestly, I know I am more intelligent than most of my neighbours, but what is that intelligence for if not to be at their service, to be used by those whose native intelligence has been crushed and stunted by poverty and anxiety?⁶¹

The anxiety, in practical terms, arises from the poverty, but Mitchison seems also to be commenting on a cultural impoverishment which is inhibiting the villagers' potential for a fuller life. They are unable to approach the 'other' culture (or the 'other' person?) in a satisfactory or satisfying way. Thus the fishermen, apart from the more enlightened Alec, can relate to the Swan only through sexual violence. We are not told whether Alec's sensitivity is innate or acquired, but it may be relevant to note that, as an engineer, he is an educated man.

It is more problematic, but perhaps valid, to suggest that the spirit/body split postulated by Holbek was also present in Mitchison's Carradale relationships. There is ample evidence in her diary entries of her erotic fascination with fishermen.

[Denny Macintosh] spoke of his early sexual experiences ... One could see the picture of the young fishermen, adolescents, burning for what they wanted, shy and clumsy, and for all that as beautiful as sea-trout under their thick clothes. (*AYTN*, p. 163)

[T]he interstices of work and thought are filled with the erotic images of the men I see and admire and work with: not, alas, their naked images, as they mostly wear three layers of jerseys, but their laughter, their eyes and mouths, touch of their lips and fingers, smell of them most of all. ... I like their shapes, I like their eyes, their smiles, the way they have of speaking or laughing; I want, as it were, not just a slip, not a tease, but

⁶¹ NM, 'What to do with the Big House', pp. 32, 33.

the whole thing. Yet I know that if I were to take it, it would be misinterpreted ... (AYTN, pp. 180-181)

Perhaps the Swan, both bird and woman, both supernatural and human, stands for the outsider, the 'other', who wants to be involved with the life of the fishermen in the most intimate way. Or perhaps she is the kind of knowledge, intuitive and eclectic, which the fishermen (in fiction and in fact), with their basic education and fundamentalist morality, are either unable to handle or socially conditioned to reject.

It can at least be stated without controversy that the Swan is a disturbing influence in the world of the five men. The final result of her appearance, the resolution of 'Five Men and a Swan', is a happy one, or at least offers hope of happiness for Alec, who has been better able than his colleagues to deal with the 'other'. Such is not the case in the less well known and equally subtle story 'The Box', which appeared in the periodical *Chapman* as late as 1993.⁶² No previous publication has so far been traced.

In outline 'The Box' is extremely simple. Five men, out poaching salmon, find a small closed box in their net. Though it bears the prohibition 'Do Not Open', they try to unlock it and then to break it open, without success. The narrator takes it home and there it opens for him, just a crack, of its own accord. He hurries off to find the others, but when they get back the box has shut again.

No easily identifiable source for this story has been found. The myth of Pandora's casket – which contained all the ills of humanity, and at the bottom, hope – is well known, but Mitchison's story cannot be said to follow it. There are tenuous points of connection: the men's curiosity about the contents of the box, and the possibility that the contents may be good or bad or both (as will be seen, we never find out). Pandora's box may have been at the back of Mitchison's mind.

There is a Kintyre folk tale, 'The Black Kist', which Mitchison may have known.

⁶² NM, 'The Box', *Chapman*, 74-75 (Autumn/Winter 1993), 13-19.

Well, of an evening when the weaver was sitting looking at the gannets diving out from Dippen Bay, where the good gravel is, what should he be at the seeing of but a large black kist being washed ashore near where he was sitting. And to the shore came the black kist that handy like, and when the weaver got it, light, light it was. 'Myself is in luck this very evening,' said he, shouldering it. But when he had gone about half a score of paces, heavy as lead became the black kist. 'What's in the wind now?' said he, throwing it down, and as he did so the lid flew off and out stepped a wee black chiel no bigger than the weaver's thumb. [*Annoyed at being jostled about, he becomes as tall as a tree and threatens to strangle the weaver, but is outwitted*].⁶³

The situation closely resembles that of genie-in-the-bottle stories, but no exactly corresponding folk tale type involving a kist, or box, appears in Aarne/Thompson. It is tempting to point to an American popular song of the early 1950s which Mitchison may have heard:

While I was walkin' down the beach one bright and sunny day
I saw a great big wooden box a-floatin' in the bay;
I pulled it in and opened it up, and much to my surprise,
Oh, I discovered a !!!, right before my eyes,
Oh, I discovered a !!!, right before my eyes.⁶⁴

The exclamation marks denote three sharp taps or drumbeats. During five further stanzas we never learn what is in the mysterious box, which is viewed throughout as a bringer of bad luck.⁶⁵

The intensity and immediacy of 'The Box', however, suggests that this is no mere retelling of an old story, but a treatment of a theme important to Mitchison.

It is difficult to place 'The Box' in the chronology of Mitchison's writing. There are echoes of some of her work from the 1940s. She recorded her own salmon poaching exploits in her wartime diary (see *AYTN*, pp.155-8) and in the poems 'Carradale Poacher's Song' and 'The Splash Net'.⁶⁶ A passing remark about one of the five poachers, 'Young Colin had not yet got

⁶³ *Campbeltown Courier*, 23 June 1923. One of a series of tales which appeared irregularly during the 1920s, retold by a local antiquarian, John Campbell of Saddell.

⁶⁴ See Appendix IV.

⁶⁵ Mysterious boxes occur with some frequency in films, as in the classic noir thriller *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), where the box contains a nuclear device. It is referenced in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where the content of the briefcase, perhaps more effectively, is not revealed.

a taste for whisky, maybe did not need it before he could be happy' (p. 13), seems to reiterate Mitchison's concern about the drinking habits of Highlanders, a constant theme in her long poem 'The Cleansing of the Knife', written between 1941 and 1947 (*CK*, pp. 39-72). However, we have noted the recurrence of certain themes and ideas in Mitchison's work over a long period. The voice is a Highland one, but free of the stock phrases noted in some later stories. This, as discussed in chapter 7, may indicate a somewhat earlier date, or simply that Mitchison is fully engaged with the story and at ease with the persona of the speaker, so that his voice comes through without distortion.

In fact there are conclusive pointers to a date no earlier than the 1950s: 'the telly' has reached the Highlands (p. 18), and the narrator surmises that the box may originate with 'an enemy from Germany or Russia or more likely The East' (p. 14). The impact of television on remote Highland communities was considerable. While the men of 'Five Men and a Swan' are certainly affected by the contemporary war, the instant information provided by television (on social trends as well as national and international affairs) has irrevocably changed the world for the men of 'The Box'.

'The Box' shows considerable affinity to 'Five Men and a Swan'. In both stories, five men find something otherworldly and inexplicable. (Neither the swan maiden nor the box is ever explained by Mitchison; they remain irrational irruptions into the everyday world.) The difference is in the mood, which has darkened, and particularly in the situation at the end. There is no prospect of a happy outcome as with Alec and the Swan.

I think I can always guess who has the box back in his room, who is asking and begging it, who is angriest. Some way, we are not doing things together, not any more. (p. 19)

So what is the box, or what is in it? It may be relevant to remember that a box can symbolise 'the feminine principle of containing; enclosure; the womb'.⁶⁷ The narrator indeed sees it in these terms:

⁶⁶ See *FMS*, pp. 55, 124. Originally published in *Scots Magazine*, 36(1941), 24, 111.

⁶⁷ Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, p. 24.

But now it was as if it had invited me to touch it, just as a woman might do, a young lassie just out of school and not knowing the cruel things this world was offering to her. Yet that too was a lie, since most of them, I thought, know the way the world wags, aye, better than the boys. At least this box is old enough surely to know what it is doing. (p. 16)

There is another numinous box in Mitchison's fiction which does appear to have some connection with the female principle. Lienors, the woman reporter in Mitchison's Arthurian novel *To the Chapel Perilous*, has got it from the Cauldron of Plenty, rather as one might draw a prize from the bran-tub at a jumble sale. Indeed it is described by Mitchison, again tongue in cheek, as such a piece of bric-a-brac.

... a shell box, really rather attractive, set with twirly, pearly turks-caps and whelklets with an occasional sprig of white coral and an inscription saying *A Present from Spiral Castle*. (TCP, p. 48)

There is more to this box, however, than meets the eye.

'I can't open the box [says Lienors] and I think there's something inside.'

'Throw it away, dear, do!' said Dalyn, and suddenly, unaccountably, feeling an anxiety towards his colleague that he had never known before, turned and looked at her. There was something about the set of her cheek, the line of her nostril, that he had not noticed earlier. He seemed to want to touch. ...

'Certainly not,' she said. 'Not yet anyway. ...' (p. 48)

Later, casually, we return to the box:

'By the way, dear, did you ever open that box? You did! What was inside it?'

'What I thought,' said Lienors. She certainly was not going to tell him. Nor any of her colleagues.

'Oh well!' said Dalyn. 'It doesn't matter to me. Some women's nonsense. ...' (p. 101)

Like the Swan and the box from the sea, this box is never explained, but it seems to contain something bearing on Lienors' identity as a woman. Dalyn's dismissal of it as 'some women's nonsense' is a delicately ironic feminist comment by Mitchison.

The narrator in 'The Box' looks for a way to break open his find, with further similarity to 'Five Men and a Swan'. In the case of the Swan, the one who does not try to force her is permitted to marry her. In the case of the box, no such happy ending ensues. The narrator does not force the box; it opens of its own accord; but it shuts again, after he has had just a glimpse of – what?

Oddly I did not think to look carefully at what was inside the box. It seemed that this no longer mattered, we did not even need to know. And yet, remembering it now, it seems that there were pieces of brightness which perhaps were things of great value, though that mattered little. And the inside of the lid which had seemed so impossible to move, with strong hands and knife blades, now seemed to rustle with colour like a butterfly in flight, almost asking to be lifted. (pp.16-17)

Given these hints at the numinous quality of what he has seen, the idea that the box is a woman seems a superficial suggestion. The hallucinations of an altered state of consciousness, or the beatific vision of a near-death experience, may be nearer comparisons. Or is Mitchison drawing again on the myth of the Goddess and her chthonic power, the source of all life?

But if it is a vision of such a kind, its joy does not remain with the narrator. Now the glimpse has gone, he is deeply unhappy. He wonders if the box ever did open; he does not want to think about it, and yet, of course, he does return to it.

Will we ever be ourselves again and do we for all that want to be? One thing is certain. The box has not opened again. I think perhaps one of us will throw it back into the sea. (p. 19)

If this is indeed a late statement of Mitchison's on the influence of the 'other', it is a troubled and troubling one. It may suggest that she is now less hopeful that the fairy lover – or she herself? – can empower and illuminate everyday life. It seems further, however, to confirm the view she expresses in some of the short stories discussed in chapter 7: that humanity in a modern, technological age has lost touch with the other world – or with the intuitive knowledge possessed by earlier generations – and can no longer accept the power and illumination which it could provide.

CONCLUSION

The reader ... is left feeling that there are two Mitchisons: one intensely organised and practical about the way forward for Scotland, and another lingering fascinated over the survival of actual Evil and the supernatural.¹

Douglas Gifford's comment on *The Bull Calves* might be applied to all the novels treated in this thesis, which has examined the occurrence of supernatural events (as she seems to have believed them to be) in Naomi Mitchison's life and the recurrence of supernatural and mythical themes in her fiction. Her 'organised and practical' activities in local, national and international spheres are well documented in the biographies by Benton and Calder, as well as in her own writing, and have been acknowledged here. Examination of the supernatural strand in her fiction, however, suggests that the 'two Mitchisons' are not so far apart as they might appear.

The themes of her novels *We Have Been Warned*, *The Bull Calves*, *The Big House* and *Lobsters on the Agenda* all point to a concern for social questions: socialism and internationalism; the regeneration of Scotland; class relations; the Highland way of life. Yet each novel (and the short stories examined in chapter 7) has a clear content of witchcraft or fairy belief, sometimes accepted and sometimes resisted by the characters, but in either case apparently part of their way of life. In the essay quoted above Gifford remarks on the difficulty of reading Mitchison's position on the supernatural. This thesis suggests that such difficulty reflects Mitchison's own uncertainty in the matter. A scientific background and involvement with social problems predispose her to a rational view of the world. Wide reading of myth, ballad and fairy tale, together with her own childhood experiences (whatever their cause), persuade her to acknowledge the irrational as part of that same world.

¹ Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 236.

Apart from the overt introduction of witches or fairies into the action of an ostensibly realistic novel, Mitchison at times refers her characters' real situation to a mythic situation (for instance in *We Have Been Warned*) and allows myth to interpenetrate real life (for instance in 'Five Men and a Swan'). It has been noted that central female characters such as Dione/Phoebe and Kirstie, so much involved with the irrational, bear a certain resemblance to herself. The impression that she sees herself as part of the myth can only be strengthened by a passage in the autobiographical *Return to the Fairy Hill*: 'Even if now I was only the Winter Queen, I was with my Corn King' (*RFH*, p. 52).

Throughout her fiction Mitchison thus uses supernatural and myth to express real-life situations. This thesis suggests that at times she is using them as a support system: a background or framework to help her deal with real life. The fairy hill and the swan maiden symbolise her position as a writer, intelligent, creative and passionate, different from her everyday companions. In both Carradale and Botswana she is an outsider searching for acceptance, which proves difficult to attain, at least partly (she feels) because of that difference. She writes of a swan maiden irrupting into the lives of Carradale fishermen, and of the Botswanan village of Mochudi as the fairy hill.

During the period which has been the focus of this thesis, the 1940s and 1950s, Mitchison published a poem as densely packed as any piece of her work with references to myth, folklore and the supernatural. This is the full text:

The hot sky breaks into cooling showers
To soothe the scorch on my child and me,
To open our eyes that we may see
How the bare bough buds and the waste land flowers.
Out of the wolf pit run the green children.

Scholars have searched and poets have written,
Have plucked the blossom and turned the shell,
Answered the riddle, rung on the bell,
Come at more than Matter of Britain.
Out of the wolf pit run the green children.

The quiet current flows ever faster,
The traveller, cautious, can not turn back,
The low clouds wait and the small sticks crack,
The witches' coven calls for its master,

Out of the wolf pit run the green children.

I have smelt the breath of the sow-faced Mother,
Have watched the Wanderer weigh his staff,
Have heard in the dusk the jay voice laugh,
Saying: one thing leads to another.
Out of the wolf pit run the green children.²

The title of the poem is 'Yes, But'. In these two words Mitchison encapsulates the contradiction between the rational and the irrational which is expressed throughout her writing, and which, this thesis argues, was a central element of her life.

² NM, 'Yes, But', *New Statesman*, 47 (1954), 636.

APPENDIX I

Margaret Murray's theory of witchcraft

Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963) is described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) as 'Egyptologist and folklorist'.¹ It is in connection with folklore – the study of witchcraft – that her name is most likely to be mentioned today. The modern Wicca movement is derived from Murray's theory of witchcraft.² Her belief is stated plainly in her entry on the subject for the fourteenth edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

When examining the records of the medieval witches, we are dealing with the remains of a pagan religion which survived, in England at least, till the 18th century, 1,200 years after the introduction of Christianity.³

Her article remained in successive editions until 1969,⁴ and this, quite apart from her books on the subject, assured considerable exposure for her ideas.

The theory has been traced back to at least the early nineteenth century,⁵ but Murray became its proponent during World War I, when unable to travel to Egypt for archaeological digs.⁶ In 1921 she published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, presenting the thesis with confidence:

The evidence proves that underlying the Christian religion was a cult practised by many classes of the community ... It can be traced back to pre-Christian times, and appears to be the ancient religion of Western Europe. The god, anthropomorphic or theriomorphic, was worshipped

¹ Max Mallowan, 'Murray, Margaret Alice (1863-1963)', rev. R.S. Simpson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Hutton, pp. 194-201 and 272-8.

³ Margaret A. Murray, 'Witchcraft', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edn, 1929, XXIII [signed M.A.M.].

⁴ Jacqueline Simpson, 'Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?' *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 89-96.

⁵ Hutton, pp. 136-40.

⁶ Hutton, pp. 194-5.

in well-defined rites; the organization was highly developed; and the ritual is analogous to many other ancient rituals.⁷

Her more populist *The God of the Witches* (1931) includes a chapter, 'The Divine Victim', which links her theory of witchcraft firmly (in her view) to the cult of the Dying God, a central feature of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

To investigate the subject of the Divine Victim of the Witch-cult it is essential to put aside all preconceived ideas, remembering always that the records were made by the prejudiced pens of monkish chroniclers ... That the sacrifice was repeatedly consummated within the historic period of our own country and of France depends upon evidence which would be accepted if it were offered in respect of an Oriental or African religion.⁸

While a readership already attracted (as discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis) by the exotic and slightly dangerous ideas of *The Golden Bough* was ready to accept Murray's view of witchcraft, the theory was heavily criticised from the start.⁹ Murray defended it all her life, writing in her hundredth year 'I argue from contemporary documentary evidence ...'¹⁰

Her use of this evidence, however, was examined by Norman Cohn in his *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), and her theory totally discredited from an academic standpoint. Murray quotes many contemporary descriptions of witches' assemblies to prove that these were merely social gatherings with no element of the supernatural. Cohn finds that, recurrently, the account as quoted in *The Witch-Cult* contains a set of dots or a dash inserted by Murray to indicate a lacuna. When traced back to their sources, these gaps contain such incidents as:

...all the coven did fly like cats, jackdaws, hares and rooks, etc, but Barbara Ronald, in Brightmanney, and I always rode on a horse, which we would make of a straw or a bean-stalk ...

Cohn adds austerey:

⁷ Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1921), p. 12.

⁸ Margaret A. Murray, *The God of the Witches* (Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 161.

⁹ See Simpson, *passim*.

¹⁰ Margaret A. Murray, *My First Hundred Years* (William Kimber, 1963), pp. 104-5 (105).

Murray is of course aware of these fantastic features – but she nevertheless contrives, by the way she arranges her quotations, to give the impression that a number of perfectly sober, realistic accounts of the sabbat exist. They do not; and the implications of that fact are, or should be, self-evident.¹¹

Before its demolition, however, Murray's theory influenced the work of a number of writers of both fiction and popular non-fiction,¹² including Naomi Mitchison. F. Marian McNeill, a Frazerian who named her four-volume work on Scottish folklore and folk belief *The Silver Bough* in homage, is a particularly unmistakable follower of Murray. *The Witch-Cult* is frequently cited in the notes and the Murray theory uncritically presented (see for instance I, p. 130, where Murray's work is described as 'a dispassionate investigation').

Frazerian echoes in the fiction of John Buchan have been noted in chapter 2. Most clearly indebted to Murray is his novel *Witch Wood* (1927), which depicts the parishioners of Woodilee as practising pagan fertility rites at Beltane and Lammas. At Candlemas, forty weeks after Beltane, the young minister of Woodilee notes sadly:

It was the season of births ... One-half of the births were out of lawful wedlock ... and most of the children were still-born. [*the second ellipsis is Buchan's*] ... Where were the men who had betrayed these wretched girls? ... What was betokened by so many infants born dead?¹³

Buchan, himself a son of the manse, appears to know the Murray theory but reject the idea of paganism as joyous and life-affirming, which she came to espouse. Yet there is ambiguity, as his hero is drawn to the naiad-like Katrine rather than the stern doctrines of the established church..

An echo of the Murray theory may appear in the work of George Mackay Brown, who draws more than once on the records of witch trials in seventeenth-century Orkney. At times, as in the short story 'Witch', he adopts

¹¹ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (Pimlico Press, 1993), p.160. [Originally published 1975]

¹² See Simpson, p. 89, and Hutton, pp. 283-5.

¹³ John Buchan, *Witch Wood* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988), p. 59. [Originally published 1927]

the view that witchcraft accusations are prompted by social motives.¹⁴ However, the Frazerian John Barleycorn theme recurrent in Brown's work is found in the radio play *A Spell for Green Corn*¹⁵, contemporary with 'Witch'. Sigrid sacrifices her virginity to save the year's corn crop in a drought, since the Midsummer Eve bonfire which used to fulfil this function has lost its significance for the community. Her execution as a witch is followed by rain and the appearance of new springs of water, the source of fertility and life.

Mitchison's major novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* was strongly influenced by *The Golden Bough*, and references in *We Have Been Warned* and *The Bull Calves* (see chapters 3 and 4) suggest that she also knew the work of Margaret Murray. Mitchison could have found the theory in the 1929 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* while writing *We Have Been Warned*, but, an omnivorous reader and a prolific reviewer, she may equally well have found Murray's ideas at source, in *The Witch-Cult*. Particularly suggestive of that possibility is the question of witch names. At the beginning of *We Have Been Warned* Dione is looking at a book-plate bearing the full names of herself and her sister Phoebe.

... her name, Isobel Dione Fraser, and her sister's name, Elizabeth Phoebe Fraser. Isobel and Elizabeth were their witch names. And Jean was a witch name. If she had another girl she would call her Jean. (*WHBW*, p. 3)

When the alleged witch Green Jean appears much later in the novel (p. 529), she addresses Dione woman to woman (or witch to witch) as Isobel Dione.

Mitchison returns to the topic in an interview some fifty years later, discussing *We Have Been Warned*. The interviewer's mispronunciation of the name Dione has been briskly corrected by Mitchison.

Mitchison: ... She's Dione [*three syllables*]. Don't you remember the *Pervigilium*? 'Cras Dione iura dicit.' ...

Isobel Murray: I'll just call her Isobel – that's her name too! [*laughter*]

Mitchison: Isobel, of course, is a witch name, as you probably know.

Bob Tait [*co-interviewer, IM's husband*]: Ah! That explains a good deal.

¹⁴ George Mackay Brown, 'Witch', *A Calendar of Love* (Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 104-23.

¹⁵ Brown, *A Spell for Green Corn*; first broadcast 1967.

Mitchison [laughter]: Well I think it's important to have a witch name. You see, my suppressed name is Margaret, which is another witch name.¹⁶

Mitchison does not expand on the subject of witch names, or what she means by the term. The bestowing of a new name on a novice witch was often part of the demonic pact, but this can hardly be what Mitchison is suggesting here (and it forms no part of Dione's story in *We Have Been Warned*). Rather, she seems to be saying that certain given names are associated with witches. This theory appears in Murray's *Witch-Cult*.

The lists of witch-names bring to light several facts as regards the women ... [T]he great mass of the names fall under eight heads with their dialectical differences: 1, Ann (Annis, Agnes, Annabel); 2, Alice (Alison); 3, Christian (Christen, Cirstine); 4, Elizabeth (Elspet, Isobel, Bessie); 5, Ellen (Elinor, Helen); 6, Joan (Jane, Janet, Jonet); 7, Margaret (Marget, Meg, Marjorie); 8, Marion (Mary). (*Witch-Cult*, Appendix IIIB: Index of Witches' Names, p. 255)

Murray, like Mitchison, seems to be referring not to devil-bestowed names but to the original given or baptismal names of the women, and saying that the women most likely to become witches are those who as infants have been christened Ann, Alice, etc. She does not seem to realise how far she is from proving this truly startling thesis. A more academic writer puts her finger on an obvious flaw in the theory:

In fact there was such a small number of female first names in common currency in seventeenth-century Scotland that it is impossible to deduce anything from their use among accused witches. Nearly all women were called Elizabeth, Margaret, Jane/t, Catherine, Christian, Mary/Marion, Ann, Agnes, Alison, Helen, Isobel, or derivatives of these.¹⁷

Mitchison's insistence on the existence and identity of witch names suggests that she was attracted to the witch name theory (failing to notice its weakness) as part of the Murray theory as a whole. The attraction of the theory itself may have been its notion of ancient, hidden knowledge linked to regenerative powers; linked in fact to fertility and motherhood, which, as we

¹⁶ *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, p. 85. Margaret was one of Mitchison's given names.

¹⁷ Larner, p. 150.

have seen, are recurrent concerns in Mitchison's work (and in her life). It seems highly probable that the Murray theory, so closely connected to *The Golden Bough*, helped to shape the presentation of witchcraft, and of women, in Mitchison's work.

APPENDIX II

Swan maidens

The myth of the swan maiden, who for a time lives with a mortal man and then returns to her own world, is often thought of as characteristic of Russian or Scandinavian folklore. There is a theory that it originated in northern Europe.

The oldest known recorded variants are Indian but this does not necessarily imply, as has been supposed, that it originated in the sub-continent. ... [T]he occurrence of the tale among such peoples as the Eskimo of Greenland and the Samoyeds suggests that its diffusion ante-dates that of the great religions. ... [P]robably the swan-maiden story evolved in a northerly climate where swans were common and nakedness was unusual.¹

The theory of a northern origin sometimes leads to an identification of swan maidens with Valkyries, the warrior maidens of Norse myth. However, Helge Holmström, in his monograph *Studier över Svanjungfrumotivet* (1919), prefers an Indian origin, even though he begins by acknowledging the Icelandic poem *Volundarkvida*, in the Poetic Edda, in which Volund the smith and his brothers live with three women who have both swan maiden and valkyrie characteristics. Holmström considers the myth a development from the story of Purūravas and Urvaśī, told in the Hindu sacred texts *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Rig Veda*. Urvaśī is a supernatural being, an apsaras, who lives for a time with the mortal Purūravas, and when she has left him appears in the form of a water bird, or swan.²

It has been noted in chapter 8 that both Holmström and the more recent commentator Barbara Fass Leavy align the swan maiden with fairy lovers in general, including the animal brides and grooms who appear worldwide in folklore in such diverse manifestations as – for instance –

¹ Armstrong, pp. 56-7.

² See Holmström, pp. 115-6, and Leavy, pp. 33-7.

selkie, antelope, beaver, dove or snake. Various theories on the meaning of the myth have been surveyed in that chapter. The suggestion that the swan maiden is originally an apsaras opens up further possibilities as to the function and significance of these 'other' spouses:

The apsaras of Asia are water nymphs, often personifying rivers. They are usually represented as the sexual slaves of a male god, but this almost certainly disguises their earlier, powerful, elemental nature, as primordial water beings.³

The apsaras theory does not entirely explain the function of the swan skin or swan dress, without which the swan maiden is unable to fly. Both Holmström and Leavy identify this motif in its various forms (sometimes a sealskin or other animal skin, or occasionally a veil, purse or comb) as differentiating the swan maiden story proper from other tales of metamorphosis. Holmström suggests that it may have derived from the primitive hunter's custom of dressing in the skin of the animal being hunted (pp. 6-9). The importance of the swan skin is maintained throughout his monograph,⁴ but it is not his purpose to pursue its meaning.

Leavy in contrast focuses on the meaning of the myth (in her view, the plight of the married woman in a patriarchal society), and finds that '[t]he stolen garment or skin can symbolically represent a youth sacrificed in the service of a man' (p. 60). Cornelia Pinkola Estés takes the rather less prescriptive view that many influences, not just marriage, may conspire to erode a woman's sense of herself.

The pelt in this story is not so much an article as the representation of a feeling state and a state of being – one that is cohesive, soulful, and of the wildish female nature. When a woman is in this state, she feels entirely in and of herself ... Though this state of being 'in one's self' is one she occasionally loses touch with, the time she has previously spent there sustains her while she is about her work in the world. ... Eventually every woman who stays away from her soul-home for too long, tires. ... Then she seeks her skin again.⁵

³ Husain, p. 42.

⁴ It leads him at one point, departing from his otherwise strictly scholarly diction, to refer rather affectionately to 'the skin so essential to the well-being of a swan maiden' (p. 136).

⁵ Estés, p. 264.

It may be noted that the swan skins in 'Five Men and a Swan' and *The Big House* are not the only 'pelts' in the work of Naomi Mitchison. Gersemi in the early short story 'When the Bough Breaks' has a magic bear cloak:

Her cloak was made of a great white bear-pelt from the north, a fairy bear that once had strange dealings with the Finn wizards; its claws met over her breast, the head fell behind, and on the under-side were written runes of great power. This cloak had been part of her mother's dower, and never did the fur wear thin.⁶

When the cloak is lost, Gersemi's fortunes decline. Julian D'Arcy points out that the cloak motif (which also appears in Mitchison's 1952 fantasy novel *Travel Light*) comes from the Norse *Viga Glums Saga*, and that

Gersemi's bearskin from the north is thus an important symbol for her cultural and racial origins. While she possesses the cloak she maintains a sense of identity and integrity ... By returning her cloak to her, Avilf is also restoring her freedom, her dignity and her identity.⁷

It is probably appropriate to notice (as D'Arcy does not seem to) that the cloak is 'part of her mother's dower'; as elsewhere in Mitchison's work, the identity is arguably Gersemi's identity as a woman.

Echoes and actual borrowings of the swan maiden story can be found over centuries and in a wide range of creative work, not only literature. Its relation to the ballet *Swan Lake* has been mentioned in chapter 8. Within the parameters of the story of the beautiful Princess Odette, turned into a swan and later impersonated by the sorcerer's daughter Odile – the two characters being danced by the same ballerina – a wide variety of interpretations is possible, which in turn suggest other readings of the swan maiden story. Two performances by the Royal Ballet within a few days in January 2005 may be cited.

[Tamara] Rojo's tragic heroine, Odette, is a woman trapped in swan guise, hating her bondage to the enchanter ... She's warm-blooded, unlike ethereal Russian swan maidens ... Then, as Odile, she's cool, the reverse of the usual dual-role interpretation. (Jann Parry, *Observer*, 2 January 2005)

⁶ NM, 'When the Bough Breaks', *When the Bough Breaks* (Jonathan Cape Travellers' Library, 1929), pp. 161-314 (162). [Originally published Jonathan Cape 1924]

⁷ Julian Meldon D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse influence on modern Scottish literature* (Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 1996), p. 159. See also footnotes 10 and 30, pp. 176-7.

[Zenaida Yanowsky] ... portrayed with unusual vividness the role's dual aspect – in some moments her Odette was evidently a woman, sleepwalking through von Rothbart's malign dream, at others she was a panicked wild bird ... As Odile she ... even looked different. Unlike the palely abstracted Odette, her Odile beamed with deadly radiance, her face suffused with a rosy triumph. (Judith Mackrell, *Guardian*, 5 January 2005)

So iconic is *Swan Lake* that it is parodied by Woody Allen.

[A] group of wild swans flies across the moon; they take the first right and head back to the Prince. Sigmund is astounded to see that their leader is part swan and part woman – unfortunately, divided lengthwise ... Yvette, the Swan Woman, tells Sigmund that she is under a spell ... and that because of her appearance it is nearly impossible to get a bank loan ... [A] week later ... the Prince is about to be married to Justine ... [He] seems to be debating whether to go through with the marriage, or find Yvette and see if the doctors can come up with anything.⁸

Barbara Fass Leavy, who has written on the occurrence of folklore themes in the work of Ibsen, finds that

Ibsen [in *A Doll's House*] used the swan maiden as a model for Nora, whose escape from her doll house commences soon after her maid finds the seemingly lost costume in which Nora will dance the tarantella for the delectation and status of that archetypal patriarch, her husband, Torvald Helmer. Nora's irrevocable slamming of the door on her marriage parallels the swan maiden's flight ...⁹

The dancing dress equates to the swan skin without which the swan maiden cannot return to her own world. But Leavy points out:

Ibsen is both true to his folklore sources and ... original in the way he inverts narrative motifs in order both to give them new meaning and also to illuminate their original significance. ... Nora leaves behind the symbolically unreal existence of the only world she has ever known in order to seek reality. (pp. 293-4)

The appearance of the swan maiden story in *Swan Lake* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and in the writing of Naomi Mitchison, suggests that further research might identify its underlying presence in a much more extensive range of creative work.

⁸ Woody Allen, 'A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets', *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen* (Picador, 1997), pp. 25-30 (28-9). [From *Without Feathers*, originally published 1975]

⁹ Leavy, p. 3.

APPENDIX III

Mass-Observation directive on supernatural belief

April 1942

(University of Sussex Mass-Observation Archive: Naomi Mitchison)

April 1942 Directive:

3a: What are your own beliefs about the supernatural?

b: Have you had any personal experience of so called supernatural occurrences?
If so describe them.

c: Describe any supernatural occurrences which you have heard of from friends or acquaintances.

a: I don't have beliefs about this sort of thing. I take it as it comes. I doubt if it need affect one much.

b: Certainly. I have seen fairies of one sort or another several times, also other appearances. I saw something of the hobyah kind on the way back from the Brighton Labour Party conference for instance. I make no inferences from this. I was sent some shot from a wishing well in Kyle of Lochalsh, in a registered envelope. They were said always to disappear and go back to the well within 24 hours of being taken. These had gone, there was a small depression where they had been. I have of course seen thought-reading going on, had my own thoughts read (by Gilbert Murray) but don't know if this counts. I have also seen things happen at seances arranged by the Psychical Research Society at which odd things happened under conditions where I don't think they could have been produced by measurable means. But this appears to be ultimately measurable, and of a different kind from things like fairies which have nothing to do with ourselves. Obviously nobody is going to talk much about their own experiences. I have had others.

c: I have never come across the Sight at first hand and those who have it even slightly find it very unpleasant and don't want to talk about it. There have been

several occurrences here, one where a cart with the body of a farm servant appeared a few days before it really did, on Dippen Brae. The mother of my best friend here, as a girl, was housemaid at Torrisdale and saw some wee Indian fairies on the lawn, very pleased about something. The master of the house who had his money in India died – elsewhere – soon after. The same man's elder brother got a warning, but it was on a Sunday coming back from church and he would not speak to the fairy woman, so he was drowned the next day. They could not find his body til his chum (whom I know) who had borrowed gloves from him, came out to find him, and they got him at once. An aunt of someone else I know was unlucky; she withered a geranium, about six years ago, by just touching it. She, and others, were so unlucky that nobody would go out fishing after meeting them. One boat that did so tore their nets at a part of the Bay where there are no rocks. There are various brounies about, and a not immoderate wish is usually granted by the Largie brounie. The schoolmaster was kept awake by it (not knowing he was in the brounie's room) when there on Home Guard manoeuvres. There is some kind of not canny thing at Cloan, my own people's house. A friend of mine saw the appearance of my father standing behind me some time after he died. Nothing at all would surprise me but I would not put too much onto it.

APPENDIX IV

The Thing

Words and music Charles R. Grean

While I was walkin' down the beach one bright and sunny day
I saw a great big wooden box a-floatin' in the bay,
I pulled it in and opened it up, and much to my surprise,
Oh, I discovered a !!!, right before my eyes,
Oh, I discovered a !!!, right before my eyes.

I picked it up and ran to town, as happy as a king,
I took it to a guy I knew who'd buy most anything,
But this is what he hollered at me as I walked in his shop:
'Oh, get out of here with that !!!, before I call a cop!'
Oh, get out of here with that !!! before I call a cop!

I turned around and got right out, a-runnin' for my life,
And then I took it home with me to give it to my wife,
But this is what she hollered at me as I walked in the door:
'Oh, get out of here with that !!!, and don't come back no more!'
Oh, get out of here with that !!!, and don't come back no more!

I wandered all around the town until I chanced to meet
A hobo who was lookin' for a handout on the street,
He said he'd take most any old thing, he was a desperate man,
But when I showed him the !!!, he turned around and ran,
Oh, when I showed him the !!!, he turned around and ran.

I wandered on for many years, a victim of my fate,
Until one day I came upon St Peter at the gate,
And when I tried to take it inside he told me where to go:
'Get out of here with that !!!, and take it down below!'
Oh, get out of here with that !!!, and take it down below!

The moral of this story is: if you're out on the beach
And you should see a great big box, and it's within your reach,
Don't ever stop and open it up, that's my advice to you,

'Cause you'll never get rid of the !!!, no matter what you do,
Oh you'll never get rid of the !!!, no matter what you do.

Notes:

Uses the melody of the traditional song 'The Tailor's Boy'.

Lyrics vary in different sources. This is the version sung by Phil Harris which topped the charts for five weeks in 1950.

!!! represents three taps or drumbeats – dah-da-da.

<http://kissd.8m.com/Jukebox/51-41.html>

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1: Books

2: Uncollected stories, poems and non-fiction

B: Works about Naomi Mitchison

C: Other works cited and consulted

Notes: Place of publication is given if other than London.

Section B: Interviews are cited under name of interviewer. Unsigned reviews are cited under periodical title.

Section C: Works by an author are listed chronologically by date of first edition.

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